PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES:

THE ANCIENT PRACTICE OF *LECTIO DIVINA* INTRODUCED TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

A THESIS-PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF

GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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JANUARY 2020

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Dedicated to my wife Heather,
who believed in me and this project even when my own faith grew shaky,
and to my children, Elliot and Anna, who faithfully prayed for me along this journey-
I love you!

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ABSTRACT

Members of Olivet Lutheran Church have a strong desire to grow spiritually. Their busy fragmented lives, however, often prevent them from experiencing the depth and peace of relationship with God. The ancient church practice of *lectio divina* can be a pathway to deeper relational intimacy with God and can also help develop spiritual maturity through praying the Scriptures, individually and communally.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING: LIFE APART FROM GOD

You have made us for yourself, Lord God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You –Augustine of Hippo[1]

This is what the LORD says: *Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls*.[2]

Introduction

God's original purpose and design has always been incarnational, relational intimacy between Creator and created. We first see the perfect fulfillment of that desire in Genesis 2 with God intimately present with His creation. We also see that not even the relational fracturing that sin introduced could change God's purpose and longing for communion with his children. Throughout Scripture, God reveals His heart—"I shall be their God and they shall be my people."[3]

The work of the serpent, our ancient enemy, is to war against God's purposes. Not content only to introduce sin into God's perfect creation, the devil still seeks to undermine the intimacy that God desires with His creation. In fact, his core temptation has not changed one bit from the original garden. Whereas God's design and desire has always been that we should be *with* God, the devil's ongoing temptation is that we can be *like* God—masters of our own domain, self-sufficient, and in control of our lives. It has been a wildly successful strategy for

1. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions 1.1.1.*

2. Jeremiah 6:16. All Scripture citations are taken from the English Standard Version of The Holy Bible unless otherwise noted.

3. Jeremiah 32:38, cf., Ezekiel 37:27, 2 Corinthians 6:16 and others.

the enemy of our souls[4] that has led human beings, even God's own children, down some dark roads.

This temptation to live apart from God rears its head in many ways. It particularly afflicts the people of God, ranging from the church receiving its moral cues from culture, all the way to our individual approach to prayer and spirituality—like our spiritual ancestors, we seek to be masters of our own domain. On the grandest scale, we see humanity's thirst for power and dominion in the intersection of faith and national politics, an unquenchable desire to wield control and influence over our culture's political and cultural identity.[5]

There is also the insidious temptation for the church to adopt the world's values of achievement—higher numbers, bigger buildings, bolder visions, and greater power and influence—as measuring sticks for success. The rise of the "mega-church," with its focus on extraordinary preaching, music, programs, and facilities, can lend itself to a dynamic of exalting professional "excellence" over the genuine but often counter-cultural movement and sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Taken to its extreme, Christians surrender authority of our spiritual formation not to the Holy Spirit, but to the professional ministry superstars. The result? God's people become mere passive and vicarious recipients of the faith rather than active participants in God's sovereign salvific work.[6]

Meanwhile, this same "results-orientation" begins to affect our approach to our own

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4. The theological framework in chapter 2 will go into much deeper analysis of this problem and the solution God has provided, even at the highest cost of his own life.

5. This, too, involves tension—Scripture speaks to our dual citizenship—earthly and heavenly—while also affirming our primary allegiance to God's Kingdom.

6. Exodus 20:19 comes to mind—that even as God manifested Himself to the people of Israel and invited them into relationship, still they shrank back instead and appointed Moses to go speak with God on their behalf. What an ironic situation for the New Testament church that is built upon the "priesthood of all believers."

spiritual and devotional life.[7] We like the idea of intimacy with God; as Augustine of Hippo reflected, it is our deepest longing! Yet, immersed as we are in this hectic, busy world, we justify ourselves: *God will surely understand if I'm just too busy to dedicate too much of my valuable time and energy to Him*. So we carve out a brief 5 minutes each morning to "do devotions" and "if God has anything to say, He had better hurry."[8] If we're particularly ambitious, we set out to blaze through the Bible in one year, perhaps hoping to master our spiritual lives or, better yet, to impress God. But our willpower and good intentions carry us only so far and we quickly become discouraged.

The experience of prayer in particular becomes confusing and frustrating because it doesn't easily line up with our results-orientation. We sense the burden that we "should" be praying but become overwhelmed with the vast numbers of resources and options available. Add to that the lack of hospitable settings to ask questions and to share in life and faith together as a community, and it's no wonder we feel so harried and stressed, and increasingly frustrated in our relationship with God. As James Houston writes, "Modern life neglects community values, replacing them with a strong streak of selfishness and narcissism. … Our generation has grown up on the idea that 'self-fulfillment' is the panacea for all of our problems."[9]

The American evangelical church is often described as "a mile wide and an inch deep." Does that sometimes glossy, superficial nature actually war against God's invitation into greater spiritual maturity? There is no shortage of information, teaching, and ministry opportunities for

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7. James Houston notes that the Desert Fathers ironically spoke of busyness as "moral laziness" – James Houston, *Transforming Power of Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship With God,* (NavPress, 1996), 27.

8. Peter Lord, *Hearing God,* (Baker Book House 1988), 53.

9. James Houston, *Transforming Power of Prayer: Deepening Your Friendship With God*, (Navpress 1996), 24.

today's Christians. But according to research, the evangelical church in America also might be starting to sense the limits of this fast-paced, programmatic approach –especially as our longing for intimate relationship with God deepens. In George Barna's research of millennials, for example, he speaks of the "closed doors" that prevent millennials from experiencing God at church: things like being unable to experience God deeply at church and church leaders who are viewed as judgmental and hypocritical. Yet, Barna also speaks more hopefully of "open windows" where churches do have opportunity to reach out to this young generation: "Two-thirds of survey participants say a good description of church is 'a place to find answers to live a meaningful life.' Over half say 'church is relevant for my life' (54%), and nearly half 'feel I can 'be myself' at church' (49%).[10] These responses from one of our youngest generations speak to a desire for the American church to return to authentic and meaningful spirituality.

So even as the fast-paced, frenzied western church begins to sense the limits of its own ability to dictate the terms of their relationship with God, God Himself is gently inviting his people back to the ancient paths of spiritual blessing and rest, a return to the intimate relationship of the original Garden where God dwelt with His people. But within that invitation, a momentous crossroads is also revealed: that even as God invites us into the way of healing and restoration, we as His people "will not walk in it."[11] We will not humble ourselves, we will not let go of our plans, our strategies, our mission statements, our speed-racing down the highway, even if there is increasingly unease that maybe we've left Jesus far behind. "Churches can run without prayer," writes Ben Patterson, "the question is, is what they're doing worth doing if they

10. George Barna, "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church." Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/ March 4, 2015, accessed June 11, 2017.

11. Jeremiah 6:16.

can do it without prayer?"[12] Later, Patterson says, "Prayer would be of inestimable value if it did nothing more than remind us of who we are before God. Unless the Lord builds the house, our work is useless."[13,14] As Jesus Himself says, "apart from Me, you can do nothing."[15]

Spiritual Maturity: God's Calling for All believers

What is this "spiritual maturity" to which our God invites His people? The simplest answer is: a growing relationship with Jesus. Paul talks of the assurance that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). This process of sanctification--the Holy Spirit shaping us increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ--is the heart of the Christian journey. God calls us first "as we are," but is faithful to continue transforming us until that final day.

Spiritual maturity is always God's will, but is it always our will? We immediately encounter at least two areas of resistance. The first is human nature—that we struggle with the fallen nature of our flesh and this world. Paul writes that all of creation is "groaning"[16] and though we wait with eager longing for God's redemption, our spiritual journey can sometimes seem more like a slog than a victory march. We get stuck, we get waylaid along the road until spiritual maturity seems out of reach and we slide back into comfortable, but inert "lukewarmness."[17] The author of Hebrews laments to the church that "you have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again

12. Ben Patterson, *Deepening Your Conversation with God,* (Bethany House 2001), 24.

13. Ben Patterson, *Deepening Your Conversation with God,* (Bethany House 2001), 49.

14. Psalm 127:1.

15. John 15:5.

16. Romans 8:22-24.

17. Revelation 3:16.

the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food."[18]

The other resistance is confusion among Christians not only how to achieve spiritual maturity, but even how to define it. George Barna's 2009 study entitled, "Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity" reveal several challenges in pursuing intimacy with God. Some findings of the study are listed below:

- A large plurality of believers (81%) equate spiritual maturity with "trying hard to follow the rules described in the Bible." This percentage held even among those who believe salvation comes through grace, not "good works."[19] If our faith is predominantly "works-based" apart from relationship with God, we will suffer burnout and disillusionment.
- Churches, according to the study, are complicit in this confusion. Most churchgoers are not clear what their churches teach or mean by "spiritual maturity."
- The confusion continues when the researchers asked parishioners for their own definition of spiritual maturity. Over 20% were unable to articulate it on their own. While the highest percentage answered, "having a relationship with Jesus" (30%), the next highest responses were, "following rules and being obedient" (15%) and "living a moral lifestyle" (14%).[20]

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18. Hebrews 5:11-12.

19. George Barna, "Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity," Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/many-churchgoers-and-faith-leaders-struggle-to-define-spiritual-maturity/ May 11, 2009, accessed November 26, 2017.

20. George Barna, "Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity," Barna Group, https://www.barna.com/research/many-churchgoers-and-faith-leaders-struggle-to-define-spiritual-maturity/ May 11, 2009, accessed November 26, 2017.

No wonder the church is confused and seeking a better way! David Kinnaman, director of the Research Project, concluded this study: "America has a spiritual depth problem partly because the faith community does not have a robust definition of its spiritual goals…" But in this challenge, there is an opportunity, according to Kinnaman:

> As people begin to realize that the concepts and practices of spiritual maturity have been underdeveloped, the Christian community is likely to enter a time of renewed emphasis on discipleship, soul care, the tensions of truth and grace, the so-called 'fruits' of the spiritual life, and the practices of spiritual disciplines.[21]

The challenge boils down to God's invitation to integrate our lives and hearts. Jan Johnson writes, "Our problem is not lack of time, but failure to value the moment and see God at work in it."[22] What is our ultimate purpose and desire? If it is simply bigger buildings and better programs, then that is where we will invest our resources; if it is to cultivate an appearance of spirituality, then our many prayer and worship meetings confirm that priority.[23] Yet Scripture speaks of a deeper allegiance, of searching and seeking after God even when the rewards don't come easily: "You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water."[24]

Larry Crabb, perhaps with St. Augustine's words about humanity's restlessness in mind, speaks to our impatience with not experiencing God on our timeline: "We're so busy filling our

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21. Cited by George Barna, "Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity," https://www.barna.com/research/many-churchgoers-and-faith-leaders-struggle-to-define-spiritual-maturity/ May 11, 2009, accessed November 26, 2017.

22. Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God*, (Navpress 1996), 70.

23. Jesus' warning to the Laodicean church comes to mind: "you say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see" (Revelation 3:17, 18). The "shameful nakedness" hearkens back to the disconnection of Genesis 3, yet in this case, they were naked and didn't even realize it!

24. Psalm 63:1.

emptiness, there's not much of a vacuum for Him to fill."[25] He counsels us to come to God as we are—in our emptiness, our doubts, our uncertainty—rather than rushing to fill our lives with illegitimate things. In that genuine, authentic searching, God will then "clean out the rubbish I pile into my inner world so that He can fill me with His reality."[26]

The answer, indeed, has been there all the time—a return to our deepest longing—to be with God, to find our heart's true home in Him. It is the purpose of this thesis project to investigate the power of the spiritual disciplines, specifically the ancient practice of *lectio divina,* as powerful tools of reconnecting to our heart's deepest longing, the "solid food" of which Hebrews speaks.

Ministry Setting

Olivet Lutheran Church in La Crosse, WI is, in many ways, a microcosm of the American evangelical church culture—active, dynamic, growing, with many multi-faceted programs, including several dedicated Bible studies and prayer groups. There is still a sense among many people, however, that a deep, satisfying life of prayer remains elusive.

Olivet Lutheran Church was organized on May 18, 1949 on "French Island" in the La Crosse region. Provided with a grant-in-aid of $12,000 from the Evangelical Lutheran Church, a number of church and non-church community members came together and constructed the first church building with cinderblock. The dedication was held on July 23, 1949. Olivet began with part-time Lutheran pastors who served other nearby churches. That meant Olivet's services were held on Sunday evenings. In 1950, a year after its launch, church membership had reached 116 with an annual budget of $1704.

25. Larry Crabb, *The Papa Prayer*, (Thomas Nelson 2007), 49.

26. Larry Crabb, *The Papa Prayer*, (Thomas Nelson 2007), 12.

In these early years, Olivet had a Board of Deacons whose job was "to assist the Pastor with the spiritual matters of the congregation."[27] By 1954, Olivet called its first full-time pastor, H.S. Babington, and a parsonage was built that included a basement used for Sunday School classes. Reverend Babington immediately began going door to door in the local community to encourage church attendance. By 1957, membership had swelled to 375 (with 150 children and youth in Sunday School) and a second Sunday service began. The church annual budget that year stood at $7551.

The original cinderblock church facility could only accommodate 100 people and the church leadership recognized the need for more space. In 1956, the *Federal Aid Highway Act* passed, paving the way for the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate Highways, with I-90 scheduled to pass directly through French Island. The church astutely and providentially purchased 3.5 acres of land adjacent to the highway. The new church facility was completed in 1961 with the Reverend Vaage reflecting in the church newsletter, "As we look ahead to the construction of Interstate 90, it is not hard to imagine that Olivet will grow as French Island grows."[28] Indeed, by 1962, church membership had ballooned to 504.

For the next 30 years, Olivet went through a series of several short-term pastorates (many as brief as a year). Membership would swell during longer-term pastorates, followed by a season of decline as pastors came and went. Conflicts and internal struggle had become entrenched by 1994, until attendance declined so much there was no longer money to pay the bills. Foreclosure loomed. An interim pastor, Reverend Jean Kloss from the ELCA Synod, was placed at Olivet to determine a course of action. Her report was cautiously optimistic – "During this year, there has

27. "Olivet History" (church-published 2008), 4.

28. "Olivet History" (church-published 2008), 6.

been much prayer during our struggles, and I believe we are seeing good results in the life and future of the Olivet congregation."[29]

In 1995, Pastor Dave Baldukas was called, who immediately encouraged a return to prayer and community benevolence. The people (and local community) began seeing their monetary offerings going to address very tangible community needs and they began to tithe more freely. As the congregation began looking upward (to God) and outward (to the community), attendance began rising again. By the late 1990's, a Saturday worship service was added and, by 2005, the church began initial work on a significant building addition which was completed in 2007.

Around this same time, Olivet also journeyed through a difficult withdrawal from the ELCA denomination, believing that Olivet's faith identity no longer aligned with that denomination's rapidly-changing belief and missional structures. Olivet chose to affiliate with a new renewal movement called *Lutherans Congregations in Mission for Christ* (LCMC). This decision brought about remarkable numerical growth as many disenfranchised members from nearby ELCA churches began attending Olivet Lutheran. More staff were hired to help meet the greater demand, including a new Pastor of Discipleship, Andrew Fortuine. In 2017, a brand-new Christian Education wing opened, effectively doubling the size of the church facility.

Today, Olivet's weekly attendance stands at close to 450[30] over three weekend services and includes a wide variety of worshippers from diverse denominational backgrounds. The core of the membership continues to be Lutheran with some recent growth from disaffected Lutherans from other area churches. The greatest increase, however, is from evangelically-minded

29. "Olivet History" (church-published 2008), 9.

30. 2018 Olivet Lutheran Church Annual Meeting report (church published, January 2019), 3.

believers from a variety of denominational backgrounds, particularly the Evangelical Free church. This spiritual "melting pot" creates a vibrant and energetic worship environment, while also causing some tension between differing theological perspectives and priorities. Ministries are plentiful and diverse, and include multiple prayer groups, Bible studies, life groups, and home groups. There is a thriving chapter of Stephen Ministry, several Recovery groups, and active children and youth ministries.

My Own Life Intersection With Olivet Lutheran Church

My own life and ministry carry remarkable parallels to the spiritual tension that exists in the greater evangelical American church. On one hand, my ministry largely reflects the stereotypical evangelical church model of faster, greater, higher, bigger, etc., My daily ministry "to do" list is always overly full; each workday is littered with meetings, pastoral conversations, administrative work and the endless (and sometimes tedious) work of keeping too many balls up in the air. Every weekend, new families visit our worship services and more ministries are created to meet the demand. It can feel like a race that has no finish line. The unspoken question for me – are people at Olivet actually growing in their faith? Are they experiencing intimacy with God? And more personally, am I growing closer to Jesus, or simply propping up a broken system?

My prayer for some time has been for God to use and redeem this imperfect ministry reality for His greater purposes. Because I actually inhabit (and thus understand) the same frenzied and harried life that most of my Olivet parishioners live, I understand their burdens and stress. But there is some bitter irony to my position too. In 2015, I chose to leave my previous busy ministry position at a United Methodist church to begin the D.Min in *Spiritual Formation for Ministry Leaders* at Gordon Conwell. I chose this course of action specifically because I

wanted to reprioritize how I lived out my faith. I especially had Jesus' words of invitation as the backdrop: "come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." [31]

Now, somewhat mysteriously, I find myself in a ministry position even busier and more demanding than my previous one. That, coupled with the reality of growing kids and my wife who also works a demanding full-time job, have left me with little breathing room to pursue the deeper life I long for. What is God's greater purpose in these circumstances?

This past year, I have seen light and life at the end of the tunnel. Many of the hectic demands of ministry were self-imposed and I have identified some ministry plates I can release. I have become increasingly familiar with the culture of Olivet and am continuing to build deeper relationships of trust with the people. I have also made a providential discovery—that despite the excellence and proliferation of ministries at Olivet, there is something of a hollow spiritual core, a deeper sense of hunger, in many of the people. The constant barrage of more ministries, programs, outreaches, and campaigns sometimes brings confusion and exhaustion, rather than edification. I count myself among those who have experienced overwhelm, but also desire to know the deeper, abundant life of Christ.[32] Is the Lord inviting me to enter into His rest and thereby invite His people there also?

Lectio Divina: God's Invitation Towards the Deeper Life

As part of my doctoral research, I began investigating *lectio divina* in depth, learning of its history, its impact, and the blessing it has been to so many people through the centuries. *Lectio divina* literally means "divine reading," and is the ancient practice of praying the Holy

31. Matthew 11:28.

32. John 10:10.

Scriptures. This approach to prayer and Scripture runs counter to many of the evangelical church's models of bigger, brighter, and faster, but has the potential to infuse God's Word and Spirit into every aspect of believers' spiritual journeys, changing the dynamic of even ordinary things in life. This, in fact, is exactly what drew me to the practice—that even a few minutes a day of meeting God in His Word has the potential to permeate the whole of life. As the Psalmist declares, "as the deer longs for streams of water, so I long for you, O God."[33]

I realized quickly that I needed to go beyond only reading about this spiritual discipline and actually start practicing it. Beginning over a year ago, my wife and I began setting our alarms 15 minutes early to start our days with *lectio divina*. We have alternated between an online lectio session called "Pray as You Go"[34] and a *lectio*-inspired Bible called *Solo*[35] which provides a short Scripture passage followed by opportunities to read, meditate, and reflect.

It's been an inspiring, helpful way to start the day and, as I had hoped, the Biblical images, words, and deeper connection to the Spirit have infiltrated my day. I find myself pondering God's Word on my drive to work and discovering its tangible riches in conversations with family and parishioners. I am challenged by the directness of Scripture dwelling in my heart and am becoming more aware of Jesus in my circumstances. And in this gentle keeping of the discipline, I'm not only growing in my own relationship with God, I'm beginning to experience in my own life what I want my parishioners to experience for themselves. More directly connected to my thesis, I have also happily discovered that my ministry and my degree

33. Psalm 42:1.

34. They describe their ministry as "a framework for your own prayer… Our aim is to help you become more aware of God's presence in your life, listen to and reflect on God's Word, grow in your relationship with God" – http://pray-as-you-go.org/about/. Accessed Jan 15, 2018.

35. Jan Johnson, J.R. Briggs, & Katie Peckham, *English Standard Version: Solo, An Uncommon Devotional*, Navpress, 2013.

program are not two separate compartments of life; they are intended to be integrated together for mutual blessing.

For the dear people of Olivet, in the midst of our very full and active ministry, the problem identified earlier becomes clear: that Olivet's ministry "current" is so rapid that even as many people are actively involved in discipleship, spiritual formation, and service, there is little time and space built in for reflection or transforming intimacy with God.[36] Instead, we experience ministries, sermons, and activities coming rapid fire, one after another, with little time to absorb or apply what we've learned. Parishioners have shared a desire to go deeper, to discover the joys and riches of Scripture and to grow in faith, but they also admit they're not sure how to grow in their walk with the Lord and also struggle with finding time.[37] Olivet appears caught in the tension that besets many evangelical churches—willing and eager to grow spiritually, but needing the right tools and opportunities to grow in the love of Jesus Christ. Thus, Olivet is given the same invitation God gave His people in Jeremiah's time: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for *the ancient paths*, ask where *the good way* is, and walk in it, and you will find *rest for your souls*."[38]

But in answering that invitation, there is a humbling that takes place in our hearts and in our churches—that it is not simply an "add-on," one more ministry approach to pile on top of our overflowing plates. It is an invitation to "do life" in a qualitatively different way—not

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36. The Gospels reveal the heart of Jesus for His people: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).

37. Cath Martin writes of evangelicals that while "most (88 per cent) agreed it was important for a Christian to read or study the Bible on a daily basis," "nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) admitted to being easily distracted when spending time with God" and "42 per cent said that they find it difficult to find time on a regular disciplined basis to pray and read the Bible" -- Cath Martin, "Evangelicals admit struggling to find time for daily Bible reading and prayer," Christianity Today, April 14, 2014.

38. Jeremiah 6:16, *italics added.*

programmatic or performance-spirituality, but a living, breathing, intimate relationship with the risen Lord. It is a return to God's own beating heart—that *He would be our God and we would be His people.*[39]

Thesis Hypothesis

Believers who desire to grow spiritually and are willing to intentionally gather in small group study and individually engage in the spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* (praying the Scriptures) multiple times a week can achieve spiritual growth that is measurable and observable.

The primary goal of this thesis project is to give tools to assist in the spiritual growth of Olivet Lutheran Church's members. To accomplish this primary goal, I, the researcher have:

- Gathered a group of Olivet's members who have expressed a desire to grow in their relationship with Jesus.
- Introduced *lectio divina* to the group.
- Developed a 40-day weekly devotional (each week focusing on a different Scriptural theme) and arranged weekly gathering times for teaching and practicing *lectio divina* together, including two weekend morning retreats.

It is believed that, according to God's promise, all who seek will find, and that in the practice of "praying the Scriptures," God's people will receive His transforming grace and experience spiritual growth (closer intimacy with Jesus).

Research Empirical Unknowns and Limitations

Lectio divina is the primary spiritual tool for this project, but there are other variables at work for the participants, notably regular Scripture reading, gathering in small groups, prioritizing prayer, and receiving guidance from a spiritual mentor. Each of these practices

39. Jeremiah 32:38.

individually are potential instruments for spiritual growth. One of the survey's goals will be to help isolate the particular helpfulness of *lectio divina* in spiritual growth.

Another unknown: is the format of the study the best means to introduce *lectio divina* to participants? Is the devotional guide's minimalist approach (predominantly Scripture with little devotional commentary and questions) most helpful?

There is also the unknown of future spiritual growth beyond the scope of the project. Will the participants continue to pursue this method of "Praying the Scriptures" beyond the 40 days? Will spiritual growth flag when there are no longer regular small group meetings? If the meeting times continue, can the ministry transition from "clergy-facilitated" to "lay-facilitated"?

The Disciplines—an Ancient Answer to a Contemporary Problem?

The remaining part of this chapter will focus on the power of the spiritual disciples (particularly *lectio divina*) to address the deep longing that exists in all people, including the parishioners of Olivet Lutheran Church.

It is Richard Foster's assertion that the spiritual disciplines are God's antidote to our superficial, busy, and hectic lives, "not only for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach… {but} for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns."[40] Spiritual disciplines are loosely defined as spiritual habits, practices, and intentional experiences that strengthen our spiritual walk with Christ. They give space for the Spirit to move and do His sovereign work in our hearts and lives.

Prayer groups and Bible studies are not foreign to the people of Olivet; currently we have many such opportunities. However, the majority of these meetings take place during the daytime hours and are largely populated with our senior members. Why? Because that demographic has

40. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, (Harper Collins, 1978, 1998), 1.

the most disposable time and schedule flexibility. Meanwhile, the ones who most struggle with fragmentation and disconnection are usually those with young families, demanding jobs, and a heavy load of stress (as Foster describes it: our "superficial, busy, and hectic lives").

The solution for our busy, heavy-laden people is not in abandoning their responsibilities (i.e., stepping *out* of the raging current); it is in inviting and integrating the presence of Jesus into their busy lives so that He is Lord also in the midst of the storm. Then, we are not striving after spiritual success with bootstrap spirituality or deferring spiritual intimacy with Jesus to some vague later season in life; we are opening every part of our lives today to the transforming presence of Jesus. In other words, spiritual formation is not an extra plate we're spinning along with our dozens of other plates; it is the foundation by which we live.

St. Clare, a contemporary of St. Francis, speaks of this simplicity of life, poetic words overflowing from her: "what a great laudable exchange: to leave the things of time for those of eternity… to choose the things of heaven."[41] And, in God's economy, when we "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, all these things will be given to you as well."[42]

Richard Foster writes, "Spiritual transformation is a work of grace. It is what God does in us. What we do counts, because we must choose to enter into, and pursue, our friendship with Jesus Christ."[43] This reflects the tension Paul writes of in Philippians: "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."[44] Spiritual transformation begins with our own humble recognition

41. Francis of Assisi, Clare of Assisi, *Francis and Clare*, (Paulist Press, 1986), 193.

42. Matthew 6:33.

43. Richard Foster and Emilie Griffin ed., *Spiritual Classics*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), xiii.

44. Philippians 2:12,13.

that it is God who initiates and accomplishes His work in us, but that our part is to make ourselves available—to *show up* in the relationship. In that way, the disciplines are best seen as a framework for growth and life, not as an end in themselves.

The vast majority of life for Olivet's people happens in between the worship services, the prayer meetings, the Bible studies. The good news of the Gospel is that God meets us in every part of our lives. Because of that, as James Wilhoit observes, "Spiritual formation does not take place primarily in small groups and Sunday School classes; instead it mostly takes place in the well-lived and everyday events of life."[45] Webb asks, "how many of us can enjoy the slow-paced reflective rhythm of a medieval monastery? A busy executive, pressured by targets, deadlines, budgets and the stress of office politics, has neither the time nor the internal quiet to meditate throughout the day on the Bible."[46]

In this way, the spiritual disciplines, at their best, serve as spiritual yeast which leavens the whole dough of our Christian existence. Through the disciplines, we make ourselves available to God; we submit the most precious commodities we have to offer—our time, our attention, our wills—out of deep love for God, not to get from God, but simply to be with God. The disciplines "allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us… A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain."[47] We show up, we come empty-handed, acknowledging our thirst, our hunger, our genuine desperation for God. In essence, we come agreeing with God's own heart—that "I will be their God and they will be my people."

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45. James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community,* (Baker Academic, 2008), 38.

46. Chris Webb, *The Fire of the Word,* (IVP Books, 2011), 98.

47. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline,* (Harper Collins, 1978, 1998), 7.

This is welcome news for people who are caught up in the real life of flesh and blood, tear-stained arguments, waiting for a diagnosis, sitting in traffic, and all the other messy elements of life—*I don't need to defer my relationship with Jesus until I can get away from my stressful life—He is present even in the middle of the storm!* Chris Webb describes the baroque painting "The Incredulity of St Thomas": that as Thomas and the other disciples witness firsthand the scars and holes of the resurrected Christ, "the sheer *physicality* of the painting is palpable; it shows the resurrected Christ as solidly flesh-and-blood man, brutally pierced by the nails and yet living and breathing still."[48] The disciples' amazement is not rooted in the separation or transcendence of the physical world, but that God has broken into the natural order and that, in fact, the natural order has left its mark on our Savior. The underlying affirmation? Life overcomes death, light overcomes darkness; yet the scars are still there. This is no Buddhist emptying of physicality, it is God entering into and redeeming the fallen nature of the world.

That is the good news of the Gospel—that it does not speak of escaping the stresses and pressures of the world, but of experiencing God's strength, peace, and salvation in every area of life. Indeed, Jesus' invitation has always been to the hungry, to the thirsty, to those who are deeply AWARE of their need for God:

- "I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."[49]
- "Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk—it's all free!"[50]

48. Chris Webb, *The Fire of the Word,* (IVP Books, 2011), 26.

49. Mark 2:17.

50. Isaiah 55:1.

- "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."[51]

What, then, do these "disciplines" look like? A spiritual discipline "is a process that has been consciously and regularly repeated, something we then do naturally and spontaneously without much conscious effort."[52] It is acting out of God's deep love for us and our (sometimes tentative) love for Him by exercising our prayer and faith muscle until our endurance grows and we have established a routine that keeps us through the various valleys and mountaintops of life. Jan Johnson explains how *praying without ceasing*[53] becomes possible in this way: "conversing with God becomes part of the rhythm of our lives, a backdrop to all activity, so that our heart becomes our private chapel" with the result that "being aware of God's presence gradually becomes automatic."[54]

The caution is that the spiritual disciplines can become a largely external exercise in performance spirituality or legalistic accounting. When that happens, we are simply exchanging one spiritual burden for another, deceiving ourselves by feeding the ego and the flesh rather than cultivating the spirit. One of the best counter measures against performance spirituality is an awareness of our motivation: that the heart of the spiritual disciplines is relational rather than transactional. The question of the disciplines' efficacy appeals more to God's character and desire for relational intimacy than in producing vending machine-like results.

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51. Matthew 211:28-29.

52. Peter Lord, *Hearing God*, (Baker Books, 1988), 177.

53. I Thessalonians 5:17.

54. Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God*, (Navpress, 1996), 26 - 27.

How might prayer and the other spiritual disciplines be liberated when approached in terms of relationship and our identity with Christ? Reading God's Word as children of the heavenly Father? Praying as His friend? His dearly beloved? A prerequisite for relationship is knowing who we are in relation to the other. When we can bask in our Father's love, the disciplines are infused with new life and joy. "The joy of feeling close to God…. This is precisely why Christians pray, why Christians give themselves body and soul to the beautiful struggle that is prayer: to feel themselves drawn into the great joy of God's presence, to see their lives transformed by that joy, and to bear witness to the power of joy to heal a broken world."[55] Henri Nouwen testifies to this relationship-oriented pursuit of God: discovering that "sitting in the presence of God for one hour each morning—day after day, week after week, and month after month, in total confusion and with a myriad of distractions—radically changes my life."[56]

Ultimately, the disciplines boil down to learning what to say "no" to in order to say "yes" to something better—the world calls us with its easy allures and shiny temptations; it promises us instant gratification. But when we consume of those same worldly pleasures, we discover their rotten core, and our spirits become glazed over. Meanwhile, Jesus invites us to partake of the true "bread of life" and His living waters and rest for our souls.

Roadmap of the Thesis Project

Chapter 1 of the thesis focuses on the problem and its setting. Despite an overwhelming amount of spiritual resources available to the American church today, there is a growing inability of the adult Christian to experience God's blessed intentions for prayer. Olivet Lutheran straddles a line between its formal Lutheran heritage roots and a movement towards evangelical

55. Douglas E. Ghristie, "The Joy of Feeling Close to God: The Practice of Prayer and the Work of Accompaniment," (Anglican Theological Review, ATWQ5A, Fall 2013), 606.

56. Cited by Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, (Zondervan, 2006), 153.

and even Pentecostal leanings. Prayer and God's Word are held in very high esteem, but our people continue to express struggles in the area of prayer and a desire to grow. Are the spiritual disciplines, particularly *lectio divina*, a way to meet this need?

In **chapter 2,** I will explore the Biblical/theological framework of *lectio divina*. This will include an overview of God's perfect intention for creation—a holistic, connected, and integrated creation, the arrival of an unwelcome intruder, the breaking of fellowship, and God as initiator of restoration and salvation. I will also explore the Scriptural basis for *lectio divina*, with a particular emphasis on prayer as the restoration of God's original intent of intimacy.

In **chapter 3**, I will review pertinent and relevant literature pertaining to the history and development of *lectio divina*. This will also include a more thorough description of *lectio divina* and an examination of its use in various faith contexts, including the evangelical church.

In **chapter 4**, I set forth the project design consisting of these four elements:

- Identify and gather a test group of 15-25 church members who have indicated a desire to grow in their prayer lives.
- Measure elements of members' prayer life by use of questionnaire, including:
    - quantity of prayer
    - satisfaction
    - consistency
    - closeness of relationship with God, and
    - impact on life.
- Begin 40-day journey with a 90-minute retreat session and arrange regular meeting times to teach, model, and practice *lectio divina* with daily exercises for participants for a total of 40 days.

- Follow up with questionnaire assessing any changes in spiritual growth and maturity.

In **chapter 5**, I will explore results of the experiment, assess how these results will affect ministry, and explore next steps for congregation:

- Examine results of the 40-day journey.
    - What differences in prayer life did members report between surveys?
    - What were areas of greatest growth in prayer? How did it affect participants' overall spiritual satisfaction?
    - Were there additional findings following the further 40 days?
    - Did participants express interest in continuing with *lectio divina?*
- Examine and discuss limitations within the project.
- Assess results in light of Olivet's ministry.
    - How can *lectio divina* be a continuing part of Olivet's ministry?
    - Can participants be trained to teach others *lectio*?
- Examine next steps.
    - Are there other elements of *lectio divina* that could be purposeful?
        - Community *lectio*
        - Staff/leadership *lectio*
        - Children & youth ministry
    - Yearly tradition to offer a *lectio* group, focusing particularly on the Advent and Lenten seasons
    - Alternate methods of this form of prayer
        - *Visio divina*
        - *Audio divina*

Finally, in the **appendices**, I will include specific materials such as:

- Group invitation
- Questionnaires
- Program outline
- Teaching materials
- Overview of participants
- Study results

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction – Humanity's Dire Predicament

What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?[1]

We begin with a problem, in fact the *universal problem*, that afflicts all humanity—that we are all separated from God. Because of this separation, we do not experience the intimacy or relationship that God intended, and the effects of our condition are everywhere: in human and creational brokenness, in sickness and pain, in relational discord, even in death. This problem infiltrates our hearts and lives: pursuing vain, busy, fragmented lives to the exclusion of deep spiritual intimacy with God.

We could list many examples of brokenness from our hurting world. All of them, however, are mere symptoms of the root cause: sin. Sin infiltrates the entire cosmos; in fact, nothing in creation has been spared from its ugly poison. But perhaps the greatest tragedy is that it separates us – human beings made in the image and likeness of God – from God, and instead, turns us inward seeking life and purpose within ourselves. It's a fruitless, vain pursuit.[2]

But in the brokenness, there is hope, for as the Hebrews passage above reminds us, God is mindful of mere human beings. He does care for us. And though the problem is grave, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."[3] His passionate desire is that we would be restored to right relationship with Him. And he continues to invite, to woo, to initiate reconciliation with us.

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1. Hebrews 2:6.

2. Ecclesiastes 1:2.

3. Romans 5:8.

A Created World -- Connected, Integrated, and Good

In the beginning… These are not only the words that initiate the creation narrative; they are also words that stir our imaginations and tugs at our spirits with a mysterious longing. The text describes the world being created exactly as God intended—each new day bringing a new set of wonders—the glorious canopy of stars, pristine flowing waters, trees with fruit that nourish the body—life bursting forth everywhere. Each day of creation concludes with God's smiling words of approval, "it is good."[4]

Finally, with the forming of humanity from the very ground—made in the image of God Himself—"God saw everything He had made and, behold, it was very good."[5] It was God's glorious creation with perfect harmony between Creator and creation, God walking "in the cool of the day" alongside Adam and Eve, the man and the woman in intimate relationship, "naked and yet unashamed."[6] Not only was this world perfect, but God Himself was there too, both as transcendent Creator with all of His attendant realities—powerful, creative, wise—but also incarnationally and relationally, the God who comes alongside and interacts with his Creation. He is their God and they are His people. There is harmony throughout; this is creation after God's own heart. It is good!

This Hebrew word *tov* (טוֹב)—translated "good" in Genesis 1—permeates the creation account. The same Hebrew word can also be rendered, "beautiful," "bountiful," even "working the way it was created to."[7] What an amazing picture—not only of wholeness, but also of God's

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4. Genesis 1:10.

5. Genesis 1:31.

6. Genesis 2:24.

7. Francis Brown, ed, *"Hebrew and English Lexicon: online version"* http://biblehub.com/bdb/1.htm 2004 - 2017, by Bible Hub, accessed January 18, 2018.

pleasure. Even the one lack—"it is not good for man to be alone"[8]—is quickly remedied by the forming of woman; a companion, a helpmeet, one who complements Adam. Together, man and woman represent the completeness of God's image as realized in humanity.

This is not just the creative narrative of events recorded long ago, buried in the wisps of history long forgotten. Our own hearts today are drawn to this innocent, blessed, integrated world. We intuitively know that we have been created for this kind of connection to our Creator and His creation, where all is *tov*.

The Unwelcome Intruder—Sin—and the Breaking of Fellowship

The blessed *tov* of creation does not last long, at least according to the brevity of the Biblical account. By Genesis 3, a sinister new character is introduced to the narrative, the devious serpent, who immediately works to cast doubt on the inherent *tov* of God, drawing Eve's gaze away from the abundant blessings that God has provided to a darker path apart from God. Ultimately, it is a question of faith: *whose voice shall I trust?* God has bestowed untold blessings and freedom upon His children; there is just one boundary given: "of any tree in this garden you are free to eat," God tells Adam and Eve, "except for this tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die."[9]

There is a discordant note in God's warning: it's the very first reference in Scripture to the word death, and it's jarring; death doesn't belong in paradise. But there it is – that for Adam and Eve to disregard God's way and to choose their own way would bring about death—a disconnection from this life-giving relationship between Creator and created. It is the anti-*tov* that stands in opposition to the original perfection and intimacy of the garden.

8. Genesis 2:18.

9. Genesis 2:17.

We know Adam and Eve's story well because it is our story too. Where God desired intimacy, human beings instead chose the darker path of self-sufficiency and pride. Relationship with the living God was broken by humanity's lust to become "like God." The events of Genesis 3 mark a turning point of cosmic proportions. The intimacy and innocent perfection of creation were damaged by Adam and Eve's disobedience, tarnished almost beyond recognition. Where there once had been connection and integration, now there was disconnection and disintegration. Sin broke the perfect fellowship that existed[10] so that we are now fragmented in our existence. Human beings were banished from the garden and disconnected from the Tree of Life,[11] and Scripture paints a bleak picture of our post-fall condition:

- All humans are "dead because of sin."[12]
- Hearts that have become "deceitful above all else."[13]
- People "futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts darkened."[14]
- Worst of all—human beings separated from our loving, holy God and, in our sinfulness, worthy of death. Even "the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."[15]

10. Just as the soil literally become "cursed" and difficult to harvest (Genesis 3:17-19), so, metaphorically, the "spiritual soil" of our lives is no longer fertile nor easily cultivated. We encounter the poison of our own selfish desires and the weight of guilt, shame, and sin. But in that is the seed of hope: the image of God within us, though damaged and tarnished, still longs for spiritual *reconnection*—not only to God, but also to the creation, to one another, and within ourselves. We can't get there ourselves, but in our longing is an opening to our need for a Savior.

11. Genesis 3:24.

12. Romans 8:10.

13. Jeremiah 17:9.

14. Romans 1:21.

15. Romans 8:22.

Covenant-God: "I Will Be Their God and They Shall Be My People"[16]

With God's original purposes of blessing and life damaged almost beyond recognition, Genesis 3 contains a marker of hope which reveals one of God's most significant character traits—his redemptive, sacrificial love. Even as the ugliness of sin and death flooded into and infected every part of His creation, God did not recoil from, or reject, his children. He went into search and rescue mode. "Where are you?" he called out to his hiding children.[17] Then, to cover their shame and nakedness, God prepared animal skins for them, marking the first death of this nascent world, but also a foretaste of Jesus Himself who would come to cover our sin through His own death on the cross.[18]

The theology of "covenant relationship" runs through Scripture like a golden thread. The biblical words most often translated "covenant" are בְּרִית (berit), appearing around 280 times in the Old Testament, and διαθήκη (diatheke), appearing over 30 times in the New Testament. Both words communicate a strong sense of a higher, more powerful authority entering into an agreement with a more needy party. The origin of בְּרִית may have come from the tradition of eating in community;[19] "the preferred meaning of this Old Testament word is bond," a covenant referring to two or more parties bound together, legally, but more importantly relationally.[20] The very term "covenant" (of Latin root—*con venire*), suggests a "coming together" of disparate parties. Where there had been separation, God initiates this "coming together" between Himself

16. Ezekiel 37:27.

17. Genesis 3:9.

18. Hebrews 9:14.

19. Genesis 26:30; 31:54.

20. Walter A. Elwell, "Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology." (Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan), https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/covenant/, 1996, accessed January 21, 2018.

and the entire creation. Inherent in the understanding of covenant are contractual stipulations that involve promises and reciprocity. God is always the initiator of relationship and blessings and we, as human beings, respond to God's invitations.

The Hebrew word for covenant first appears in the Noahic narrative. However, certain hints in the Biblical record indicate that God's covenant with the world was already in effect during the creation account. The prophet Hosea compares Israel's unfaithfulness to Adam's breaking of the covenant in Genesis 3.[21] God speaks to Jeremiah of His unchanging covenant with the day and night,[22] hearkening back to the very first day of creation. [23]

Later, when God establishes his covenant with Noah, it suggests not a brand-new agreement so much as a reinstatement of the creation covenant that had been broken by sin. Inherent in this covenant promise is the implication that not just humanity, but all of creation, has been corrupted by the fall, and needs redemption and reconciliation. Notably, the text is clear that while "all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth,"[24] Noah stood out—he had found favor with God. In fact, his relationship with the Lord is spoken not only in terms of righteousness—"Noah was blameless in his generation," but also relationally—"Noah walked with God."[25] The destruction from the flood refers to both humankind and the earth itself – "Behold, I will destroy (humankind) with the earth."[26] But through righteous Noah, God's covenant intentions of blessing and relationship with the human race and creation would continue.

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21. Hosea 6:7.

22. Jeremiah 33:19-20.

23. Genesis 1:5.

24. Genesis 6:11.

25. Genesis 6:9.

26. Genesis 6:13.

Notably, after the flood waters had cleansed the earth, Noah responded to God's covenant love (represented by the rainbow) by worshiping—building an altar and offering a sacrifice. According to the Biblical text, the aroma pleased God, who reaffirmed his covenant with every living creature.[27] The relationship between Creator and the creation was restored.

After the cosmic nature of the Noahic covenant, God introduces a new element of his covenant-nature with Abram in Genesis 11: God's promise to Abram to bless and multiply him in order that he and his descendants would be a blessing to all nations. The imagery of "pilgrimage," "promised land," "blessing" and "family" in Genesis 12 all speak to the beginning of restoring that lost fellowship between God and humanity. That Abram was childless when he first received the promise only added to the necessary relational faith needed to enter into this covenant relationship with God. According to the text, Abram passed this relational test: "he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness."[28,29]

The one-sided nature of relational faithfulness is continually laid bare during the Old Testament narrative. While God repeats his covenant promise over and over through the patriarchal generations,[30] the people do not reciprocate God's faithfulness. They do not adhere to the covenantal stipulations. The covenant soon dims from the collective consciousness of the Israelites in Egypt. Yet, in their suffering and heavy groaning under Pharaoh, something deep

27. Genesis 9:9-10.

28. Genesis 15:6.

29. In Genesis 18, Abraham receives what some scholars believe was a theophany—the preincarnate Jesus (or at the very least, some manifestation of God), along with two angels, visiting the patriarch and his wife Sarah. Abraham offers warm hospitality to his honored guests and God repeats the covenant promise. Three subsequent biblical texts refer to Abraham as a "Friend of God" (II Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; and James 2:23). How fitting that the conduit of God's covenant promise to the world would be called God's "friend."

30. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"—Genesis 50:24.

within the people's collective spiritual identity draws them back to God. They cry out, they pray, and the text specifically indicates that God heard their groaning and He "*remembered his covenant* with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob."[31] Where Noah and Abraham had been the instruments of God's covenant promises, now Moses would fulfill God's earlier promise to Abraham to deliver his people from a strange land and bring them to one "flowing with milk and honey."[32]

After a dramatic series of signs and wonders against mighty Egypt, God established a covenantal festival called the Passover to commemorate his people's deliverance from the bitterness of slavery and death.[33] The journey of redemption continued through the Exodus—a calling of God's people out of slavery and bondage to the cruel Pharaoh, a real-life metaphor for oppression of sin and God's deliverance from the spiritual chains of captivity. This would be a fulfillment of God's heart that His people would be "my treasured possession."[34] Even the giving of the Mosaic Law marked something more than just a contractual agreement; this was to formalize a loving, covenant relationship.[35]

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31. Exodus 2:24, *italics added.*

32. Exodus 3:8.

33. Exodus 12:27.

34. Exodus 19:5.

35. And yet the testimony of the Old Testament, the age of "Law" under the old covenant proved over and over again the deficiency of that very law to bring internal transformation and intimate relationship. At the very giving of the Law on Sinai, the people sent Moses as their intercessor to connect with God on their behalf and shrank back in fear from God's holy presence—"they trembled with fear {and} stayed at a distance, and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die'" (Exodus 20:18). Later, as Moses' absence grew intolerably long for the people, they revealed their complete lack of relational intimacy with God by forming a golden calf to serve as a representation of their deity. James Wilhoit writes, "the event represents a sad but constant reality in Scripture. God's invitation is to shalom, to peace, to wholeness, but instead of accepting his transformative formation, humans choose to form idols that meet our pressing needs," James Wilhoit, "Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community" (Baker Academic, 2008), 35.

However, despite the dramatic rescue and reinstitution of relationship, the Israelites did not remain faithful to their covenantal vow for long. Even as Moses was receiving instructions concerning worship and faith, the Israelites made an idol and worshiped it.[36] This breaking of the covenant kindled God's wrath, with the sovereign Lord even threatening to destroy the people once again and fulfill his covenant promises through Moses.[37] Moses, in a foreshadowing of Christ, served as a bridge between God and the people, a "covenant mediator." God relented from his consuming wrath and an uneasy relationship with the people ensued.[38]

Interestingly, as God renewed His covenant promise of faithfulness concurrently with the reinstitution of the Ten Commandments, He particularly noted the importance of the Sabbath to the covenant, instructing the people,

> *Above all* you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. …. Therefore, the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.[39]

Through the Sabbath, there is opportunity for God's people to rest and to be refreshed by relationship with their God, one another, and creation itself. This commandment, too, hearkens back to the timeless creation narrative.

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36. Exodus 32.

37. Exodus 32:9-10.

38. Exodus 20 exposes a distance born of suspicion and distrust between God and His people as He reveals the Ten Commandments with thunder from the dark mountain. The people shrink back in fear and appoint Moses to be their continuing intermediary–"They said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!'" (v.19). By Exodus 34, as Moses continued to intercede on behalf of the people, God reconfirmed the heart of the Covenant with His people by re-inscribing the Ten Commandments and declaring, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7).

39. Exodus 31:12, 16-17, *italics added.*

Wilderness Wanderings and Restoring Relationship

After the establishment of the Law, the people of God arrived quickly at the cusp of the Promised Land,[40] but the report of giants inhabiting the land caused their hearts to falter. The people fell back into fear, accusation and despair. The covenant relationship between God and his people had had no time to flourish or take root. The transition from slavery to freedom, from fear to trusting relationship would require time to reestablish. From that place of shrinking back into fear, the people were driven back into the wilderness, famously wandering there for 40 years. It was a time of purging the original rebellious generation and of receiving guidance, protection, and blessing from God until, finally, they were re-*covenanted* with the Lord. They became His people once again.

From that vantage point of relationship, God commanded His people to learn, to know, and to remember His word—to meditate, to reflect and to apply it to life:[41]

> You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.[42]

The message? Do not forget the Lord your God - His Word brings life.

As the beginning of a new national chapter, Joshua succeeded Moses as the leader of the Israelites. Once again, God reminded the people: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you

40. Numbers 13.

41. An early precursor to *lectio divina.*

42. Deuteronomy 11:18-19.

will have good success."[43] There would be many challenges and temptations facing the people as they entered the Promised Land, but maintaining that intimate covenant relationship would ensure material and relational blessing in the new land.

The promise of covenant relationship between God and His people continued through the time of the Judges; even as Israel repeatedly proved unfaithful, God remained faithful. By the time of Israel's monarchy, God promised David victory and that the kingdom would be established forever:

> The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son.[44]

This covenant made with David was a continuation of the fulfillment of Jacob's prophecy over his son Judah in Genesis 49 that a ruler would come from him. The far greater fulfillment was David's descendent Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.[45]

The Prophets and the New Covenant

The prophets continued to declare God's heart, even during the darkest days of Israel's history.[46] Even as the people worshiped other gods and Assyria and Babylon loomed as conquerors, Jeremiah declared the hopeful word of the Lord, "I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to

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43. Joshua 1:8.

44. 2 Samuel 7:11-14.

45. See lineage in Matthew 1 and Luke 3.

46. The prophets also lamented the people's propensity towards idolatry: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught" (Isaiah 29:13). Paul would later testify in Romans 7 to the inability of the Law to bring relationship and transformation.

me with their whole heart."[47] God's plans became even more specific in Jeremiah, chapter 33, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."[48] Speaking to a beaten down and despondent exilic people, God reminds them of his faithful covenant of love: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."[49] God continues,

> 'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And *I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*'[50]

Ezekiel, writing from captivity in Babylon, builds on this promise of restoration and relational intimacy: "I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God."[51]

The prophet Hosea reveals an almost aching heart of God to be in intimate relationship with His people, even as they fall away, are beaten down and stained by the world: "I will make you my wife forever, showing you righteousness and justice, unfailing love and compassion. I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as the LORD."[52]

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47. Jeremiah 24:7.

48. Jeremiah 33:11.

49. Jeremiah 31:3.

50. Jeremiah 31:31-33, *italics added.*

51. Ezekiel 36:27-28.

52. Hosea 2:19-20.

In these prophetic words of promise, it's not difficult to hear echoes of Eden where God walked in intimacy with His people and all of creation was complete, whole, and integrated. But even as God promised a return to that intimacy and wholeness, the reality of sin stood in the way. The Law, for all of its specific treatment of human behavior and sin, remained only an external babysitter and placeholder, unable to transform the heart, or restore relationship. The fulfillment of God's ultimate plan required something greater than Moses and the Law, something greater than the Israelite monarchy, or the hopeful words of the prophets.

Because of this, some Bible scholars believe the prophet's promises of the Messiah did not constitute a "discontinuity of past covenants…" but rather, "a time is coming when the covenant would be renewed, expanded, and applied in a radically new way"[53] with the coming of the Christ. This sense of "continuity" between the testaments is seen in the ongoing familiar covenant refrain, "I will be their God and they will be my people."[54] The Law would continue, but would no longer be written on impersonal stone tablets, but on His people's hearts through the advent of the incarnate word, Jesus Christ. The relationship would no longer be external, but deeply intimate and internal. In this way, the "renewed" covenant would be the fulfillment of all the Old Testament covenantal promises, found not in an external agreement, but in a Person.

Jesus Christ—the Mediator of the New Covenant

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus Christ entered the world "full of grace and truth,"[55] heralding an incarnational fulfillment of God's covenant promise. Indeed, at the very last supper with disciples before the cross,

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53. Walter A. Elwell, "Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology." (Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan), https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/covenant/, 1996, accessed January 21, 2018.

54. Jeremiah 31:33, Revelation 21:3.

55. John 1:14.

> he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'[56]

These words of Jesus marked a fundamental change in several ways. According to Hebrews, the death of Jesus Christ would forever change (and take the place of) the old sacrificial system, "for it is impossible for the blood of sheep and goats to take away sin."[57] Secondly, the law had, to that point, been only external. It revealed God's holy standards but provided no power or even desire within His people to obey or fulfill the Law. Enter Jesus, the only one capable of fulfilling the Law and of providing us with the immeasurable gift of the Holy Spirit. In that way, God's covenant as revealed in the Old Testament, was only a "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things."[58]

Yet, despite the huge theological covenantal transformation with the coming of Jesus, the essential *core* of the creation covenant remained unchanged—God's faithful love for His creation and in particular, for His people—"I will be their God and they shall be my people."[59] That very heart of God was demonstrated through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son, Jesus the Christ, and the subsequent giving of God's Holy Spirit to the Church. The apostle Paul tells us that, "God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved."[60]

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56. Luke 22:19-20.

57. Hebrews 10:4.

58. Hebrews 8:5.

59. Ezekiel 37:27.

60. Ephesians 2:4-5.

Jesus: The Difference-Maker

The Biblical witness is that, even in the midst of broken relationship and disintegration, God is the pursuer and initiator of restored fellowship and renewal. And in Jesus, the beloved, unique Son of God, the relationship was at last restored and our hearts were healed: "But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father."[61]

What we could never do ourselves—whether through our own effort or through the agency of the Law—God has done for us through Jesus Christ. He has fulfilled the promise of the covenant instituted at creation. And what had been for so long only a future-tense longing of God's heart—*I shall be their God and they shall be my people*—could finally be fulfilled through the coming of Jesus Christ: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession… Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people!"[62]

Through Him, the image of God is repaired within us and our true identity as God's children is restored: "therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."[63,64] It is the long detour from Eden to the New Jerusalem,

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61. Galatians 4:4-6.

62. 1 Peter 2:9-10.

63. 2 Corinthians 5:17.

64. Eugene Peterson provocatively writes on *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, "God is only and exclusively God in *relationship*," pg. 7. It would seem God is clearly God in creation as well. But Peterson's emphasis is telling—that God's heart, His identity and character are primary revealed through relationships with His people."

culminating with the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promise first established at creation: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'"[65] In that way, the original stipulations of the Covenant remained constant – that as God initiated and invited, His people were given the choice to respond, to agree, to accept the conditions of the covenant, and thereby choose to accept the inherent blessings. Through Christ, God's covenant promises have truly been fulfilled, as Sabbath is transformed from an external day of rest to an internal Sabbath rest in Christ. We can recognize this covenantal paradigm of invitation, relationship, stipulations, and promise in Jesus' invitation to his followers, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). *Lectio Divina* is a method of prayer that draws us to respond to that covenant promise of invitation.

The Tension of the "Now and the Not Yet"

Why, then, if the power of sin has been broken and the image of God within us is restored, do we still struggle with sinfulness in our humanity? Why does the creation continue to groan? Why does God not join us for walks in the cool of the day? Why is there still disease, heartache, and death? If God is with us, why is our relationship with Him so often fragmented and unsatisfying?

It's clear that even as the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ turned the tide against sin and death, we continue to live in the "now and the not yet," in between the first garden (Eden) and the second garden (the new heaven and new earth). And so even as we rejoice in the restored relationship between God and his people, we continue only "to see in a glass darkly"[66]

65. Revelation 21:3.

66. 1 Corinthians 13:12.

and to struggle with the fallen flesh we inhabit. Paul captures this tension of the "now and the not yet" in Romans 6. He "delights" in the good that Jesus has restored yet is dismayed that he is still held captive by sin and his "body of death," only to end with praise for the gift of Jesus Christ who gives us the victory![67]

Paul goes on to explain: "we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies."[68] We have been given a down payment of the perfectly restored creation that is yet to come, but until then, there is longing, a groaning (experienced even by creation) as we sense inwardly that this is not our final, perfected state, nor is this our final destination. The author of Hebrews speaks of a "longing for a better country—a heavenly one"[69] that all of God's people inwardly experience. It's a spiritual homing beacon that recognizes we are pilgrims passing through while longing for heavenly rest and relationship with the God who created us, knows us, and loves us.

Researcher Earl Wilson points to the "dualism" of our human nature—things like peer pressure, social conditioning, and an unwillingness to admit the truth about ourselves—that still override the redeemed nature within us. Even as we are drawn deep down to the *tov* of the original creation, the pressures and expectations of our surrounding culture pull us in other directions. Moses' words to the Israelites on the cusp of the Promised Land were prescient: "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction."[70] The battle is just as real today.

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67. Romans 6:22-25.

68. Romans 8: 23.

69. Hebrews 11:16.

70. Deuteronomy 30:15.

This "dualism" becomes even more damaging, however, when our view of God is distorted. Wilson writes, "we tend to fashion our image of God from other authority figures like parents or teachers. Difficulties arise when these people are harsh, inconsistent or weak—all the things that God is not."[71] God has revealed His kindness and grace, He has granted us salvation and forgiveness of sin; He has poured out His Spirit upon us. And yet we still harbor doubts, "did God really say…?" And while the objective reality of Christ's atoning work is sure and true, our faith is wobbly and frail. We continue to see in a glass darkly. We are divided within ourselves.

Resurrection Sunday turns the tide. The same disciples who scattered on Good Friday and huddled in fear on Silent Saturday were witnesses to Jesus' glorious resurrection on Easter Sunday. As they immediately discovered, even the risen exalted Lord still bears the scars of human existence, yet he is no longer subject to the groaning creation – he has overcome.[72] The Apostle Paul declares that we too are included in the victory of the resurrection, "thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"[73] and "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."[74]

That is the good news of the Gospel—that it does not speak of escaping the stresses and pressures of the world, but of experiencing God's strength, peace, and victory in every area of life. Indeed, Jesus' invitation has always been to the hungry, to the thirsty, to those who are deeply aware of their need for God:

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71. Wilson, Earl, *The Undivided Self: Bringing Your Whole Life in Line with God's Will,* (InterVarsity Press, 1983), pg. 49.

72. John 16:33.

73. 1 Corinthians 15:57.

74. Romans 8:37.

- "I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."[75]
- "Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk—it's all free!"[76]
- "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."[77]

The people of God have always existed in this tension. The church is the bride of Christ and, at its best, reflects the very identity and character of Jesus Himself. The Book of Revelation reveals for us the ultimate fulfillment of our identity—that someday, God's people will be clothed all in white, prepared as a bride for the bridegroom at the heavenly banquet.[78] But the journey of sanctification is not yet complete; we are living in the "now" and the "not yet."

The Gospel story of Mary and Martha beautifully captures the tension between *doing* and *being*.[79] Eventually, the "Martha" model of ministry—one of activity, accomplishing, and empire-building—can leave us frenzied, depleted, even resentful. Despite the allure and distraction of shiny temptations all around us, what we most long for is to return to the profound integration and connection—the *tov* we see in Genesis 2—of walking in intimate relationship with the living God.

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75. Mark 2:17.

76. Isaiah 55:1.

77. Matthew 211:28-29.

78. Revelation 19:8.

79. Luke 10:38-42.

Lectio Divina: A Possible Pathway Back into Intimacy and Fellowship

Shortly before going to the cross, Jesus promised his frightened disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."[80] We too, in our fragmented lives, are reassured by Jesus' ongoing care and incarnational love. In fact, we are invited to enter into this continuing love story with God, not because we are worthy, but because we know that God desires and pursues intimacy with us. This is the invitation into a deeper life of prayer and relationship.

So many parallels to the ancient people of God exist in our own generation today—our rebellion, our wandering away, our short attention spans. God's desire, however, also remains unchanged, that *He would be our God and we would be His people*. As children of God through Jesus Christ, we are invited to "draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."[81] God has offered us His very presence through His Word and the gift of prayer: "For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, 'in returning and rest you shall be saved."[82] This thesis project attempts to answer some of these very questions:

- Can meeting God in Scripture and prayer help fill our deepest longing?
- Do we experience through "praying the Scriptures" that the presence of God is available to us in every season and circumstance?
- Do we discover that there is no circumstance where God is not already present, already seeking us out? "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?... Even if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!"[83]

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80. John 14:18.

81. Hebrews 4:16.

82. Isaiah 30:15.

83. Psalm 139:7-8.

Ultimately, meeting God in His Word becomes an honest, authentic utterance of our deepest longings, even when we have no words.[84]

The Biblical Rationale for Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina's core tenets are found throughout Scripture and reflect God's desire that we be in close relationship with Him.[85] The practice is not just based on casual reading, but on deep reflection and encountering God through His Word. One helpful metaphor is partaking on the choicest food. We begin by taking a bite through reading Scripture (*lectio*); then chewing on it through meditation (*meditatio*); then savoring its flavor (*oratio*) and, finally, "digesting" it and making it a part of the deepest selves (*contemplatio*).[86] This is a beautiful and Scriptural way to describe the joy of entering deeply into the treasures of God's Word.

Though the term *lectio divina* does not appear in Scripture, the practice has significant Scriptural support, notably in the life of Jesus Christ who would often steal away into the wilderness to be alone with, and reconnected to, the Father. Jesus' desert wandering in Matthew 4 where he fasted from food and water for 40 days suggests a higher form of provision than earthly food. In fact, his rebuke of Satan, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"[87] is a model and invitation to a deeper, spiritual sustenance. As he would later tell his disciples, "I have food to eat that you do not know about."[88]

These spiritual themes of connection and sustenance hearken back to the exodus from

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84. Romans 8:26.

84. Many of the additional permutations of *lectio divina* will be covered in chapter 3; for this chapter, only the basic four elements of *lectio divina* will be examined.

86. Gervase Holdaway, *The Oblate Life*, (Liturgical Press 2008), 109.

87. Matthew 4:4.

88. John 4:32.

Egypt. Part of God's covenant promise of faithfulness and blessing included the building of relationship, the fulfillment of God's heart that "I shall be their God and they shall be my people." The post-exilic prophet Isaiah writes, "As with cattle going down into a peaceful valley, the Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. You led your people, LORD, and gained a magnificent reputation."[89] According to Christ's own words, He is the fulfillment of this wilderness manna –"I am the bread of life."[90]

The book of Hebrews takes great lengths to compare and contrast the relationship that God had with His people in the Old Testament to the church's relationship with Jesus. Hebrews 4 reveals that the opportunity for Sabbath rest was always available to God's people, yet because of their hardness of heart, generations of people in the Old Testament failed to enter that rest. Yet, with the coming of Jesus, the invitation shines that much brighter. Come! "With confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."[91]

The disciples, of course, were deeply inspired by and drawn to Jesus' prayer life, prompting them not only to admire, but also to ask: "Lord, teach us to pray…"[92] The God who redeems us by His own blood is the same God who invites us to know Him more deeply, to enjoy relationship with Him, until faith becomes sight.[93] *Lectio Divina* can be a powerful prayer practice for believers and has its roots firmly based on invitations from God's Word.

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89. Isaiah 63:14.

90. John 6:35.

91. Hebrews 4:16.

92. Luke 11:1.

93. 2 Corinthians 5:7.

Silencio (Silence) as Precursor to *Lectio Divina*

Scripture indicates that silence is not only a proper response to the Lord's majesty, but also helpful for us to hear God's Word. Habakkuk enjoins us, "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him,"[94] and from that place of silence, the prophet begins dialogue with God.[95] In Psalm 46, God invites his people to "be still and know that I am God," with the confidence that even as we are still and silent, He continues to work. One of the saddest rejected invitations from God is found in Isaiah 30:15, "For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength, but you were unwilling."

Lectio (Reading)

God's Word is powerful, "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."[96] It reveals to us the heart, plans and purposes of God and does a sovereign work in us as we take it in: "Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!"[97]

Yet the sounds, noises, and distractions of this world can so easily drown out the voice of God. For the Word to do its work in us and through us, we must receive it and allow it mastery over us. Like Elijah who discovered God's voice in a gentle whisper,[98] we too must train our hearts and minds to hear and receive God's Word. Reading God's Word in this way is obviously

94. Habakkuk 2:20.

95. Habakkuk 3:1ff.

96. Hebrews 4:12.

97. Psalm 119:1.

98. 1 Kings 19:12.

very different from reading a magazine, a newspaper, or even reading large portions of Scripture at a time. While God gives us the gift of His Word and His Holy Spirit who promises to guide us into all truth,[99] our part is to give space, time, and attention to hear the gentle whisper of His voice. That means slowing down, embracing silence, and inviting the sovereign Spirit of God to speak to us. Throughout Scripture, we see the power of God's Word to bring transformation, revival, and new life to His people. Specifically, God often uses His Word to remind the people of His Covenant and bring renewal.

In Exodus 24, God spoke the words of the Law to His people through Moses, thereby confirming the covenant. The people heard the Word and responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."[100] Almost as a bookend to their desert wanderings, the people gathered at the cusp of the Promised Land 40 years later, where Moses once again reminded the people of their need for God's Word: "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."[101]

Following the post-Solomonic split into Judah and Israel, the Word of God disappeared from the public consciousness, and the people had slipped into idolatry and ignorance. When the Torah was rediscovered, King Josiah was spiritually convicted upon hearing the Law, and he gathered all the people together to hear the Word:

> And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform

99. John 16:13.

100. Exodus 24:7.

101. Deuteronomy 11:18.

> the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant.[102]

Following a period of brief revival, the people of God once again slipped into apostacy, breaking the covenant, and were carried off into captivity in Babylon. The Lord, however, remembered His covenant promise and returned His people to the land. As Ezra read the Word of God to the reassembled people, revival once again broke out. The covenant relationship was restored.

The dramatic power of the Word to transform us was fully realized in Jesus Christ—the very Word of God in flesh coming into the world to proclaim God's message incarnationally to His people.[103] As Hebrews declares, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."[104] Throughout his ministry, Jesus invited his listeners to hear and to understand his words. After his death and resurrection, Jesus, on the road to Emmaus, opened the Scriptures to the two disciples. Later, after his disappearance, they wondered aloud, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?"[105]

But beyond hearing and understanding the Word, Jesus offered an even greater intimacy—that He would enter the hearts and lives of his followers: "I am the bread of life," Jesus said,[106] and through the reading and receiving of God's Word, the Word enters our lives and does its work of transformation in us.

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102. 2 Kings 23:2-3.

103. John 1.

104. Hebrews 1:1.

105. Luke 24:32.

106. John 6:35.

God's Word also comes to us in deeply personal ways: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."[107] The Word of God works inside of us,[108] bringing nourishment and life. Peter admonishes us to "long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good."[109] As Jesus Himself says, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."[110]

Meditatio (Meditation)

The Word of God speaks to us in a deeply personal way and, as we read the Word, God invites us to receive it deeply, to marinate in it, to ruminate upon it. The word of God has a powerful effect in our souls—it accomplishes exactly what God purposes for it.[111]

We are invited as God's people to focus our hearts and minds upon Scripture—to meditate upon it. Once we have found a word or a passage in the Scriptures which speaks to us in a personal way, we take it in and "ruminate" on it. Scripture provides us with many rich metaphors for meditating.

Psalm 1 promises blessings and spiritual prosperity for the one who meditates upon God's word: "his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."[112] The passage conveys the strength of a tree receiving nourishment from streams of water, producing fruit, with roots that go deep, and life that can

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107. John 10:27.

108. 2 Thessalonians 2:13.

109. 1 Peter 2:2.

110. John 6:63.

111. Isaiah 55:11.

112. Psalm 1:2-3.

withstand life's storms and challenges. There is nothing frenetic or anxious about this picture; it is an invitation to abide, with God's Word bringing the fruit.[113] There is also "delight" in receiving God's Word. The tree (believer) recognizes the source of life—it is holy Scripture—and eagerly receives it. Finally, the passage indicates a constancy of receiving, of meditating upon God's truth. As the Psalmist declares, "let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer."[114] The meditation is ongoing, during day and even the night.

This metaphor of being "fed" by God's Word is often associated with meditation throughout Scripture. "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!" David cries out, "Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"[115] Later, the Psalmist proclaims, "My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips: when I remember Thee upon my bed and meditate on Thee in the night watches."[116] The Word of God is truly food to our soul and sweet to the mouth: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"[117]

Jeremiah, the prophet who burned inside with the Word of God, prayed to the Lord: "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight."[118] Ezekiel experiences this same sweetness of God's Word as he obeyed the Lord's instructions: "'Son of

113. cf John 15:5.

114. Psalm 19:14.

115. Psalm 34:8.

116. Psalm 63:5-6 (KJV).

117. Psalm 119:103.

118. Jeremiah 15:16.

man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it tasted sweet as honey in my mouth.'"[119]

Jesus, the Word incarnate, makes this connection even plainer: "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven."[120] The Word of God is a necessity for sustaining life, a point that Moses declared to the ancient Israelites on the cusp of the Promised Land: "And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."[121]

Meditating on God's Word also means we are willingly choosing to submit to God's authority; we are allowing its truth, its wisdom, its conviction to have mastery over us. It is not just for our head; God's Word reaches down to the deepest levels of our lives, our souls, our very being. Mary, mother of Jesus, not only received the good news concerning Jesus, but also "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart."[122]

Meditation primarily focuses us on the Lord God through His Word. It involves rejoicing and worship as we grow in relationship with Him: "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord."[123]

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119. Ezekiel 3:3.

120. John 6:48-51.

121. Deuteronomy 8:3.

122. Luke 2:19.

123. Psalm 104:33-34.

Meditation also provides us with understanding and wisdom. The Psalmist says, "My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding."[124] The path to understanding comes from deeply pondering God's truth: "Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works."[125]

Meditating upon God's Word also encourages and inspires us to live out our faith with courage and conviction. God told Joshua on the cusp of the Promised Land, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it."[126]

Finally, meditation transforms our being. It keeps us from debilitating anger: "Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds and be silent."[127] It transforms the way we think: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."[128] It transforms our anxious thoughts: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."[129]

Oratio **(Prayer)**

The third step in "Praying the Scriptures" is praying the Word of God. We are using the inspired words of Scripture to form our own prayers. This includes praise, lament, petition,

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124. Psalm 49:3.

125. Psalm 119:27.

126. Joshua 1:8.

127. Psalm 4:4.

128. Romans 12:2.

129. Philippians 4:4.

intercession—any kind of prayer based on the Word of God.

The Bible, of course, is a book containing not only prayers, but also people like us who prayed. God Himself is the originator of prayer, for from the very beginning He communicated in relationship with His people and calls us to reciprocate. Though the fall interrupted and changed that relational dynamic, prayer has continued to be the hallmark of God's heart that He would be our God and we would be His people.

God spoke to His people from the beginning—granting stewardship over all creation.[130] He declared his faithful covenant promise to Noah and to Abraham, and renewed it with Moses: "thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."[131] God spoke through the Law and the prophets to communicate his heart with the people.

Likewise, the people of God have always been invited to prayer, both individually and communally, with prayer as the basis for a growing relationship with God. The righteous kings turned to God in prayer, seeking His help, wisdom, and blessing. Nehemiah prayed even as the King was awaiting an answer from him.[132] The prophets modeled an almost running dialogue with God through prayer. And of course, the Psalms—the prayer book of the Bible—represents the entire range of human emotion and experience: praise, worship, pleading, repentance, complaining, even the "imprecatory" Psalms that invoke God's wrathful judgment upon one's enemies.

The gift of prayer only grows in the New Testament. Jesus consistently modeled prayer for his disciples, going to "lonely" places to pray and reconnect with his Father, especially in

130. Genesis 1:27-30.

131. Exodus 33:11.

132. Nehemiah 2:4.

busy, stressful seasons or before making big decisions.[133] In fact, the disciples were so inspired and drawn by Jesus' deep and intimate prayer life that they implored him, "Lord, teach us to pray!" Jesus responded, "pray in this way."[134] Not only does He model prayer for us, He teaches us.

In the Gospels, we see the contrast between self-righteous prayers: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people"[135] and humble, desperate prayers: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."[136] The incarnational presence of Jesus demonstrated to God's people that prayer is not sending our words millions of miles away to some distant deity; it is speaking with our immanent and personal God from the very depths of our hearts. So, the sinner, the foreigner, the outcast all are invited to the Savior on level ground. Jesus even cautions us, "when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words."[137] It is not the words, but the heart that matters.

The Book of Acts reveals prayer as the source of power, encouragement, and wisdom for the early church. The disciples prayed, the community prayed; even Gentiles such as Cornelius spoke directly to the Lord in prayer.[138] Paul later admonished believers to "pray without ceasing,"[139] lifting up fellow believers and government leaders[140] and seeking healing

133. Luke 5:16 & Luke 6:12-16.

134. Luke 11.

135. Luke 18:11.

136. Luke 18:13.

137. Matthew 6:13.

138. Acts 10:1-6.

139. 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

140. 1 Timothy 2:1-3.

for others.[141] We are even promised the intercession of the Holy Spirit when words fail us.[142]

Though we see God's people praying in community, Jesus also taught us a personal form of prayer devotion—instructing us to find a private "prayer closet": "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."[143] Though the context of this passage is warning against the hypocrisy of praying to be "seen" and admired by others, there is nonetheless God's promise of reward for those who pray in secrecy. Is it that, stripped of our desire to impress or perform for others, we are left only with our relationship with God? A private room with shut door indicates an intentionality of purpose and devotion. It is seeking God for God alone.

This parallels Jesus' style of prayer, for though He certainly prayed publicly and often, He also prioritized prayer in private places, very early in the morning, time alone His Father. As Matthew 14:23 notes, Jesus so prioritized this deep connection to the Father that He would even send his disciples and the crowds away.

Jesus invited his disciples into this deeply personal style of prayer during his time of greatest agony and struggle. Following the Last Supper with his followers, and just before his arrest, Jesus instructs his disciples to "watch and pray." Going a little further, he shares with his three closest disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me."[144] This was a golden opportunity for the disciples to learn prayer at its most raw, vulnerable, and passionate, but as the Word reveals, they slept through it all instead.

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141. James 5:13.

142. Romans 8:26.

143. Matthew 6:6.

144. Matthew 26:38.

How important that we learn from our Savior—that prayer comes from the deepest parts of our soul. Like Jesus, we too can pray in our agony, "Father, please take this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done."[145] And as Jesus models, we can agree with Him in prayer, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."[146]

Contemplatio (Contemplation)

After reading, meditating, and praying, contemplation invites us to a place of abiding, *being*, in God's loving presence. There are no more words or efforts required; it is a wordless embrace from the lover of our soul. Covenant language is notable in God's words to Jeremiah: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."[147] In that posture of love and grace, we experience not only a taste of the intimacy from the pre-fall creation, but also a foretaste of eternity, the glorious fulfillment of the covenant promise.

Notably, this experience of contemplation does not require serene surroundings. When the Psalmist invites us to simply "be still and know that I am God,"[148] the context is that of the nations raging, the earth giving away, and the waters roaring and foaming. Yet, the people of God can rest secure in His love and provision. In Psalm 23, the surrounding environment is once again troubling and disturbing—"even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil for you are with me."[149] In fact, the great Shepherd of our souls is not only *with* us in the valleys, but also leads us to green pastures and still waters.[150] This contemplative posture

145. Luke 22:42.

146. John 16:33.

147. Jeremiah 31:3.

148. Psalm 46:10.

149. Psalm 23:4.

150. Psalm 23:2.

of prayer is one of complete vulnerability and trust, even when life is chaotic.

The Psalmist speaks of an even more intimate contemplative connection than shepherd—that of mothering: "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me."[151] A weaned child is not suckling so much as resting contentedly. In contemplation, there is no more striving, struggling, or even seeking; it is simply enjoying the peaceful presence of God.

Incarnatio (Action)

The Word of God often refers to our faith in terms of movement and forward progress. Paul writes, "For we walk by faith, not by sight."[152] Jesus encouraged his followers, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."[153] James writes, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?... But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."[154] *Lectio Divina* is best seen as a channel of God's grace, filling us in order that God's blessings can have tangible effect through us.

Biblical Summary of *Lectio Divina*

The Scriptures declare God's steadfast love for creation, and His ongoing covenant desire that "I shall be their God and they shall be my people."[155] Contained in the pages of the Old and New Testament is the beating heart of God that desires relationship and intimacy with His

151. Psalm 131:2.

152. 2 Corinthians 5:7.

153. Matthew 5:16.

154. James 2:14 & 26.

155. Ezekiel 37:27.

children. We see a God who pursues and draws us, who "[leads us] with cords of kindness, with the bands of love."[156]

While the Old Testament clearly reveals the heart of God for His people, the New Testament reveals that love incarnationally. Jesus, in his great high priestly prayer, says, "O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."[157] While both testaments reveal a God pursuing, even wooing his people with his covenant love, Jesus incarnation fulfilled God's heart that we would be united with Him.[158]

While not mentioned by name in the Bible, *lectio divina* invites us into a deep encounter with God through His Word, reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating Him. *Lectio divina* is not a manmade tool so much as a response to God's clear invitation to know him intimately through praying the Scriptures. Through the vehicle of *lectio divina,* we are shaped more into the glorious image of Christ and renewed in relationship with the living God.

Conclusion and a Look Ahead

God created us not out of a need or lack, but out of an intrinsic desire to pour out His love in relationship with us. Sin is the barrier—our fallen nature desires our own way and even actively rebels against intimacy with God. Why? Because we resist the death to self-interest it will require in order to experience relationship with God. Therein lies a battlefield – not primarily behavioral or moral (though those contexts reveal the symptoms of the disease); it is

156. Hosea 11:4.

157. John 17:25-26.

158. John 14:26.

ultimately a question of lordship, of submission, of surrender.

Sin presents an intractable problem for us, but not for God. The Gospel in a nutshell: "God so loved the world that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."[159] As Jesus would later remind his followers, He came so that we could have "life and have it abundantly."[160]

Scripture testifies that believers, through his power, have been granted "all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to his own glory and excellence."[161] The intent of this research project is to explore how "praying the Scriptures" is one of those gifts from God that lead to life and godliness and a gift from God to fulfill the *tov* that He has always intended that He would be our God and we would be His people.

In Chapter 3, the focus turns to the church, both ancient and contemporary. The people of God discovered and developed this wonderful gift and resource called *lectio divina*, and we see how praying the Scriptures has continued to help the people of God in sustaining a closer relationship with God. In chapter 3, we will examine some of the key issues:

- What are *lectio divina*'s historical roots?
- How did successive generations further develop this prayer tool?
- Why the remarkable contemporary growth of *lectio divina* far beyond its original context?
- Why is there suspicion in certain contexts regarding this prayer practice?
- Where is the Holy Spirit of God inviting the church forward?

159. John 3:16.

160. John 10:10.

161. 2 Peter 1:3.

I will close with a portion of the beloved Psalm 23—the promise and the invitation for all of God's people, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."[162] Amen.

162. Psalm 23:6.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Is there a reason why we, as human beings, spend most of our days merely skimming the surface of life's frenetic demands — filling our time paying bills, shuttling kids back and forth, squeezing in a quick family dinner together, and allowing the distractions of texts, emails, and honking horns to seize our attention? The Psalmist proclaims: "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me."[1] The words invoke a sense of deep surrender to the billows of God's Spirit. There is a calling, an invitation, that even as we are consumed by the busy demands of life on the hectic surface, the quiet beckoning from deeper places invites us deeper into God's healing and loving presence.

Yet we hesitate. *It's dangerous there,* we intuitively sense. *If I go to those deeper places, I may lose myself; I may forever be changed and transformed; I may even die in some way.* But our souls also recognize there is genuine life and movement and cleansing in God's living waters. Yes, if we are to experience that life abundant that Jesus promised his followers, we must answer the call.

We examined the problem in chapter 1: that left to our own devices and desires, we are naturally drawn away by this world from God's lifegiving love and peace. While our heavenly Father desires to pour out the blessings of salvation and new life upon us, we stubbornly resist and choose our own way instead, a way that leads to death.[2] The goal of spiritual formation, then, is maturity in Jesus Christ, a return to the relationship Adam and Eve initially enjoyed in

1. Psalm 42:7.

2. Proverbs 14:12.

the Garden. Time is not a burden that compels us to achieve, but rather a gift to pursue intimacy with God. This blessed relationship with God is not compartmentalized or detached from our surrounding world but integrates with every part of our existence. True life in Christ is not static, but a relational daily walk, a surrender and acceptance of His presence and love in our lives. As individuals and as His church, we are tempted in so many ways by our fallen world and flesh but are invited to recognize and invite God into every aspect of our lives.

In chapter 2, we looked to our checkered human history through the lens of Scripture. We are gloriously created in God's perfect image and given untold blessings to enjoy, chief being God's presence with us. But, instead, we rebel and choose our own way. The story, however, does not end with separation and death. God has broken into human history as "Immanuel" through Jesus Christ His Son to invite us back into relationship. The church, the imperfect but deeply loved Bride of Christ, is now God's chosen instrument to bring healing and reconciliation to us and the world. Still, the tendency of human nature is to seek our own ways apart from God. We have an ongoing need of our Savior.

The spiritual disciplines, including *lectio divina*, have developed through time as tools and structures to help forge again that deeper connection to God. The major steps of *lectio divina* all have precedent in the Word of God:

- ***Silencio* (silence)**: Scripture tells us: "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."[3]
- ***Lectio* (reading):** The Psalmist proclaims, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."[4]

3. Lamentations 3:26.

4. Psalm 119:105.

- ***Meditatio* (meditation):** "This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; but you shall meditate therein day and night."[5]
- ***Oratio* (praying):** "Pray without ceasing."[6]
- ***Contemplatio* (contemplation):** we are invited **"**to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."[7]
- ***Incarnatio* (action): "**But be doers of the word, and not hearers only."[8]

Far from being a human invention or structure, the building blocks of *lectio divina* are already found in God's Holy Scriptures! The invitation to seek and enjoy God through these elements have been practiced by God's people down through the ages. We are simply invited as God's people in our own day and age to enter God's divine blessings through *lectio divina*.

In chapter three, therefore, we look through the annals of church history (and even the pre-echoes of *lectio divina* in the Old Testament) to those hungry and seeking men and women of God who have, in some way, recognized the fullness of life beyond the hectic surface, and have embarked on an exploration of deeper relationship with their Creator. They have experienced that sacred intersection of a holy and redeeming God who reveals Himself to us in the context of our messy and complicated human existence. As the Scriptures testify, elements of l*ectio divina* have been practiced and experienced by God's people for thousands of years. But there have been layers of new understanding and experience in every generation. God, it

5. Joshua 1:8.

6. 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

7. Colossians 2:3.

8. James 1:22.

seems, not only generously provides us with spiritual disciplines and invitations, but also renews and revitalizes them for each generation.

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the development of this blessed spiritual practice throughout church history. In addition, there will be an assessment of relevant literature concerning contemporary practices, including common misconceptions concerning *lectio divina* and opportunities for the practice to promote spiritual transformation in the present church context. Finally, how is the Holy Spirit inviting the church into deeper intimacy through *lectio divina* in our contemporary church context? We will grapple with the question: could this time-honored practice actually be one of God's blessings for a church that too often reflects its harried and superficial cultural milieu? The golden thread that ties the journey together is the prophet's ancient words of invitation: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters!"[9]

Historical Context Leading to Development and Use of Lectio Divina

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."[10]

A Biblical and historical irony of *lectio divina*'s origins is that it has developed and flourished in cultural milieus remarkably similar to our own. There is not only an intrinsic desire within each of us to reconnect with our Creator, but also a certain restlessness and rebellion that reveals itself, both in our hearts and surrounding culture. The prophet Amos speaks of a "famine of the Word of God."[11] While this "famine" is executed by the sovereignty of God, the context makes it clear the people had turned away from the living God to idols and were simply reaping what they had sown.

9. Isaiah 55:1.

10. Isaiah 40:8.

11. Amos 8:11.

The prophet Ezekiel, living in a time of great upheaval and national judgment, was enjoined to "eat this scroll."[12] Why? So that "all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart, and hear with your ears."[13] Rabbi Moseh Reiss observes that the scroll notably contained lamentations and mourning: "the word in Hebrew 'achor' also means the evil side or from the end, the scroll comes from the evil side or from the end of the world."[14] As Reiss opines, such a scroll would seem to be quite unpalatable to eat. Yet the prophet declares it "as sweet as honey in his mouth."[15] Even in a period of great struggle and lamentation, there was also blessing and sweetness in God's Holy Word, an invitation to return to the Holy One of Israel. We hear the same invitation from the prophet Isaiah, "For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.' But you were unwilling."[16]

The Psalmist often experiences (and expresses) the crushing lows and soaring highs of human existence within a single day or even hour! The invitation to come to God through His Word and prayer, even in all the complicated depths of our humanity, can already be found in Scripture hundreds of years before the coming of Christ (and the formal beginnings of *lectio divina*). One is reminded of God's invitation to "be still and know that I am God," even as the nations rage and the earth shakes.[17] God speaks to his wayward people in Zechariah not only

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12. Ezekiel 3:3.

13. Ezekiel 3:10.

14. Reiss, Moshe, "Messengers of God: A Theological And Psychological Perspective," *Bible Commentator Messengers of God: A Theological And Psychological Perspective,* http://www.moshereiss.org/messenger/12_ezekiel/12_ezekiel.html, accessed June 2, 2019.

15. Amos 3:3.

16. Isaiah 30:15.

17. Isaiah 30:15.

with rebuke, but also invitation: "Thus declares the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you."[18] We see even greater pre-echoes of *lectio divina* in Jesus, who is our Sabbath rest.[19] In Christ, we discover fullness of rest, wholeness and peace in the midst of the world's raging storms.

Michael Casey also posits that a deeper experience of *lectio divina* can be found by entering into a role of friendship/mentorship with the human authors of Scripture. As we drink deeply of God's words in the Psalms, for example, we are forming a kinship also with David. When we meditate on Paul's writings, we ponder his personality and motivations. As we go deeply into the words and life of Jesus, we partake of the living Word of God. All these faithful witnesses become companions to us on the journey.[20]

***Lectio Divina*'s Historical Roots**

Though the seeds and rationale of *lectio divina* are based in God's Word, church history reveals a progression in its development. Origen in the 3rd century used the Greek term *thea anagnosis* (divine reading) to describe a devotional, formational approach to Scripture. Origen's contemporary, Cyprian of Carthage, is credited with the saying, *Sit tibi vel oratio assidua vel lectio: nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum* ("You should apply yourself to prayer or to reading: at times you speak with God, at times he speaks with you").[21] At its heart is the conviction that God speaks to His people through His Holy Word. Additional references to

18. Zechariah 1:3.

19. Matthew 12:8, John 10:3.

20. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina,* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph, 1995), 15.

21. Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, Cistercian Studies Book 238, (Liturgical Press, 2011). Kindle Edition, Location 81 of 2153. This saying continued throughout the middle ages and was reaffirmed as recently as 1965 in the Second Vatican Council.

lectio divina appear in writings by Jerome, Ambrose, and other 4th and 5th century patristic writers.[22]

The practice of "spiritual reading" became more widespread, however, when Benedict of Nursia (480 – 547) introduced the practice as part of his famed "Rule of Saint Benedict." Eager to help monks under his authority not only to assimilate to the monastic culture, but also to thrive spiritually, Benedict built opportunities for service, worship, prayer, and Scripture into the monastic way of life. He wrote that because "idleness is the enemy of the soul… the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading."[23] Notably, while all four main elements of *lectio divina* are present in Benedict's Rule, they are not specifically divided into separate elements, but constitute a more holistic approach to praying the Scriptures. This stands in contrast to later attempts to isolate each element, whether chronologically or spiritually.

Michael Casey notes that while the practice of prayer and Scripture-reading was known in the church, personal devotional time in this 6th century monastic environment actually was quite rare, making Benedict's Rule revolutionary for his time. According to the Rule, every Benedictine monk was expected to spend three hours a day specifically practicing *lectio divina.* Benedict viewed this kind of "reading as one of the sources of spiritual energy, something that puts us into contact with grace and thus makes possible an enhanced level of fervor and unselfishness in daily living."[24] Already, we see the power and practice of *lectio divina* not

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22. Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, Cistercian Studies Book 238, (Liturgical Press, 2011). Kindle Edition, Location 249 of 5273.

23. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina,* (Intervarsity Press 2012), 17.

24. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina,* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph, 1995), 5.

primarily in taking people out of their circumstances, but inviting God to transform us in the midst of them.

In addition, Benedictine monasteries did not allow for the choosing or selective picking of favorite passages of Scripture. The practice was "continuous reading of the Scriptures, carried on from day to day, omitting nothing. In this way, honor was done to the integrity of revelation."[25] Michael Casey notes the benefits of such a practice in critiquing our modern tendency to turn again and again to a well-worn or beloved passage of Scripture. Instead, he recommends a practice of *lectio divina* in which contemporary seekers read entire books of the Bible at a time.[26]

Western monasteries continued practicing this form of *lectio divina* through the ensuing centuries until Guigo II in the 12th century brought further clarity to this form of prayer. He wrote a short treatise on the practice entitled, *The Ladder of Monastics*, detailing the four rungs of *lectio divina*. Borrowing from the Old Testament imagery of Jacob's Ladder, the image of the progressive, upward "ladder" was popular in middle age writing for its concept of spiritual achievement. Much of our understanding of *lectio divina* flows from Guigo's short but clear explication.

Wilhoit and Howard sums up the history of *lectio divina* well: as "a practice that has been common to the whole Christian church: the meditative reading of Scripture employed to facilitate a transformative intimacy with God."[27]

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25. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina,* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph, 1995), 7.

26. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina,* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph, 1995),14.

27. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina,* (Intervarsity Press 2012), 19.

The Development of *Lectio Divina* in the Evangelical Tradition

While *lectio divina*'s roots date back to the Biblical era and early church fathers, there is also a very real, though conflicted, history within the evangelical movement. Evan Howard writes, "The practice of 'lectio divina' – devotional reading of the biblical text – is popular these days. While people have explored this practice within Roman Catholic history… Christians of all varieties—including evangelicals—are employing *lectio divina.*"[28]

Howard traces the devotional use of Scripture from the Reformation through the early 20th century and finds that "a formative approach to the reading of Scripture bearing great similarity to what we call *lectio divina* today was a common, if not normal practice."[29] Much of this devotion to reading Scripture, of course, traces back to Martin Luther in the Reformation. As Peter Toon notes, Europe in the early 16th century was facing a situation of "universal nominal Christianity"[30] wherein most everyone was baptized but, apart from that, did not take their faith seriously. Thanks to the Reformation and subsequent counter-Reformation (along with Gutenberg's printing press), devotional interest in prayer and Scripture soared. Martin Luther, in 1535, wrote a devotional booklet called *A Simple Way to Pray*. This small work contained Luther's method of reading, reflecting, and praying specifically designed for laypeople. Subsequent Lutheran pastors and thinkers continued to develop Luther's original treatise.

Interestingly, a full century later, Caspar Calvot described this approach from Luther as

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28. Evan Howard, *Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition*, Journal of Spiritual Form & Soul Care, Vol 5, No. 1, 57-77, 56.

29. Evan Howard, *Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition*, Journal of Spiritual Form & Soul Care, Vol 5, No. 1, 57-77, 57.

30. Peter Toon, *From Mind to Heart,* Baker Book House Company, 1987, 70.

"the ladder of devotion," similar to Guigo's descriptive terminology for *lectio divina*. As Toon writes, "this ladder is the fruitful use of divine truth through daily meditation, self-examination, and prayer, guided and assisted by the Spirit of Christ."[31]

By the 17th century, Pietist scholar Augustus Herman Francke began identifying different kinds of Bible-reading, including devotional. Charles Hambrick-Stowe spoke of meditating after reading and before prayer, while George Whitefield describes contemplation perfectly, even if he does not specifically use the word itself: "We often pray best when we speak least. There are times when the heart is too big to speak… and perhaps the soul is never in a better frame than when, in a holy stillness and unspeakable serenity, it can put itself as a blank in Jesus' hand, for him to stamp on it just what he pleases.[32] Howard sums it all up well: that "evangelicals (Reformers, Puritans, Pietists, revivalists, and so on), similar to the classic practice of *lectio divina*, have regarded the devotional reading of Scripture as a recognized practice, and one which is to be accompanied with a variety of attitudes: dependency, expectancy, humility and obedience."[33]

Lectio Divina: An Overview

Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?[34]

Lectio Divina is a time-honored, blessed posture and method of prayer that invites and seeks God to transform us through His Word and Spirit. Using the elements of Scripture

31. Peter Toon, From Mind to Heart, Baker Book House Company, 1987, 73.

32. Cited in Evan Howard, *Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition*, Journal of Spiritual Form & Soul Care, Vol 5, No. 1, 57-77, 71.

33. Evan Howard, *Lectio Divina in the Evangelical Tradition*, Journal of Spiritual Form & Soul Care, Vol 5, No. 1, 57-77, 65.

34. Jeremiah 23:29.

reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation,[35] we enter in to prayer believing God is already initiating and drawing us into a transforming, divine encounter with Him. We enter in faith, believing He desires intimacy with His children and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.[36] Equally important is that we enter into prayer with a posture of submission, humility—seeking to listen, and expecting to hear God's voice. Tim Gray writes, "the aim of all prayer is an intimate communion with Christ."[37]

Jesus speaks to this condition of humble anticipation in Matthew 6 when he gives instructions about how to pray: "when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."[38] The expectation first is that we actually pray ("when you pray…"). Secondly, there is a "secret place" of seeking the Father, a place of choosing to block the distractions and allures of this world's voice in order to meet with the Father. Finally, there is a "reward" that comes from this time with the Lord. Is the reward material? Or is it some inkling of a return to Eden where God is with us in a deeply intimate way – where we know God and are deeply known by Him?

David Benner writes of a revelatory personal discovery – that through prayer, "God gained access to me to do the spiritual work of transformation."[39] *Lectio divina*, in fact, far from being "quaint but irrelevant, … was developed expressly for transformational purposes… a way to opening ourselves to God so that we might be touched, awakened, realigned, integrated, and

35. These represent the four basic elements of classic *lectio divina,* but there are additional elements that have since been included, including "*silencio*" at the start and "*incarnatio*" at the end.

36. Hebrews 11:6.

37. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 23.

38. Matthew 6:6.

39. David Benner, *Opening to God Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 13.

healed."[40] Richard Foster goes so far as to say that God uses *lectio divina* as a *primary* mode of transformation in people's lives.[41]

Choosing to enter deeply into this kind of intimacy and communion with God, however, presupposes the spiritual condition of hunger and thirst. Michael Casey wisely distinguishes Bible study from *lectio divina*; the first is gathering information; the other is opening ourselves up to genuine transformation.[42] One is reminded of Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me."[43] Bradley Holt's very definition of Christian spirituality, in fact, is being "thirsty for God."[44] It is primarily about building relationship rather than information gathering.

Jesus himself says it in the *Beatitudes,* "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."[45] How are they satisfied? Jesus states it clearly to the Samaritan woman at the well: "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."[46] As we enter into this kind of prayer, our deeper longings rise up within us. We enter into a space to hear, to notice, to feel. We hear echoes of Jesus' invitation spoken to us

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40. David Benner, *Opening to God Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 13.

41. Richard Foster, *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation,* (HarperOne, 2010), 62.

42. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), vi.

43. John 5:39.

44. Bradley Holt, *Thirsty for God, 2nd ed.,* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005), 1.

45. Matthew 5:6.

46. John 4:14.

personally, "what do you want me to do for you?"[47] and "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."[48] In this way, *lectio divina*, at its heart, is completely countercultural. It slows us down into reflection rather than speeds us into greater efficiency, it points to a higher authority than the world; it declares allegiance and surrender not primarily to ourselves, but to a living Savior. In so many ways, *lectio divina* bids us come and die, so that we discover life. Wilhoit and Howard echo the promise of transformation in Romans 12:2: that in *lectio divina*, "we allow the Scripture to soak into us and reprogram our heart, changing the very concerns and ideas that control our beliefs and feelings."[49]

The "Nuts and Bolts" of *Lectio Divina*

Stephen Binz describes *lectio divina* as "a traditional way of reading Scripture that allows the Word of God to penetrate our hearts and leads us to grow in an intimate relationship with him."[50] *Lectio Divina* serves as a natural landing place in steeping us in the Word, in transitioning us beyond "mastering" Scripture to "being mastered by" Scripture. Michael Casey writes, "*Lectio divina* leads to a conscious endeavor to live in accordance with the Gospels."[51] In other words, there is a genuine, practical outworking of God's truth in our lives as we are shaped by the Word. And yet, there is also a sense of mystery and transcendence as we encounter the Living God through the text: "We are being confronted with the mystery that transcends all

47. Mark 10:51.

48. Matthew 11:28.

49. James C. Wilhoit & Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina, Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life*, (Intervarsity Press 2012), 58.

50. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina*, (Word Among Us Press 2008), 14.

51. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), 63.

intellect and surpasses our skills… The most we can do is submit to it."[52] There is the necessity of approaching the written Word of God with only the greatest humility and submission. Pastor, theologian and author A.W. Tozer notably wrote his first work, *Pursuit of God*, from his knees. Prayer, reverence, love for God, and openness to be transformed are the Scriptural mindsets God invites us into as we seek His face.

Many practitioners of *lectio divina* specify the importance of "place" – a prayer closet or sacred space where we seek and hear God's voice, a consistent quiet place that we can return to daily. Another important commitment is time. Benner writes, "set a realistic amount of time that you will strive to be available for meeting God in silence and the Word."[53]

Equally important as time and place is a commitment to seek after the Lord with one's whole heart. Michael Casey writes of three dangers to our commitment that we encounter in our journey toward intimacy with God. First, laziness: "an unwillingness to make an effort to do something that our mind approves."[54] Casey indicates we will be able to recognize some of the reasons that prevent us from seeking God, while other reasons remain opaque. Casey lists *acedia* next and prophetically observes, "Acedia is a lack of commitment to spiritual values which leaves a person unable to settle down to anything serious for any length of time."[55] This is the prevailing vice of today's western world, according to Casey – an inability to focus our hearts and minds on any one task (especially a challenging one) for any length of time. Our

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52. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), 93.

53. David Benner, *Opening to God Lectio Divina and Life As Prayer*, (Downers Grove, Ill), 59.

54. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), 19.

55. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), 19.

constant attachment to modern smart phones represents perhaps the best symbol of this. Finally, Casey lists "fantasy" – seeking out mind-numbing distractions, activities, and thoughts that serve no function other than to give us respite from our stressful lives.

Lectio divina, interestingly, can be effective in spiritually exposing and addressing many of these hidden barriers to experiencing intimacy with God. Binz writes, "The regular practice of *lectio divina* gradually creates a 'biblical' person, whose mind and heart are saturated with the words, images, and memories of Scripture. But this process takes time, dedication and persistence."[56]

Silencio **(Silence)**

While the traditional approach to *lectio divina* involves four steps—reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation—many practitioners also include an additional two steps, *silence* at the beginning and incarnating *action* at the end. Indeed, the invitation to silence and solitude to precede and permeate prayer is a consistent theme and invitation among pilgrims down through the ages. Alan Fadling speaks to the almost "sickness of soul" that our modern life produces: "when I'm talking about hurried and unhurried, I'm not just talking about miles per hour. I'm talking about an anxious, driven, frenetic heart."[57] Later, Fadling describes a season of invitation in his own life where "what took root in my own heart was the desire to know Jesus as an unhurried Savior"[58] and how rich times of silence and solitude allowed him to experience that same sacred rhythm as Jesus. Henri Nouwen likewise testifies of the mysterious power of

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56. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press 2008). 22.

57. Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 8.

58. Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 9.

silence whereby "first, silence makes us pilgrims. Secondly, silence guards the fire within. Thirdly, silence teaches us to speak."[59]

Just as our work flows out of rest, so does Godly wisdom flow out of silence. As Nouwen notes, the Desert Fathers are proof of that. In contrast, those of us who are living entirely in the hustle and bustle of our frenzied lives, "without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self."[60]

Alice Fryling points out that in silence and solitude, the inner workings of our heart and spirit are laid bare: "our thinking minds try to tell us how to feel. But stressful feelings are like the 'fix engine' light on a dashboard, telling us that something is wrong inside."[61] Distractions can serve as indicators in the same way: we must "keep the eyes of our mind and heart on Him who is our divine Savior. Only in the context of grace can we face our sin."[62] As Wilhoit and Howard observe, "solitude forces us to sit with ourselves and acknowledge our thirst."[63]

But it's also in these times of inner silence that God speaks and works a divine healing in us: "In quiet and silence the faithful soul makes progress, the hidden meanings of the Scriptures become clear, and the eyes weep with devotion every night. Even as one learns to grow still, he draws close to the Creator and farther from the hurly burly of the world."[64] We see this same

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59. Henri J M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 42.

60. Henri J M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 15.

61. Alice Fryling, *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*, (Formatio Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books 2009), 60.

62. Henri J M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 20.

63. James C. Wilhoit & Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina, Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life*, (Intervarsity Press 2012), 14.

64. Richard J. Foster and Emilie Griffin, eds., *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000), 150.

blessed discipline in Jesus — of connecting with His Father in solitude – a discipline that would bless and inform his public ministry—"{Jesus} didn't hesitate to rise before sunrise or stay up well after sunset… Clearly, Jesus made a special effort to have regular uninterrupted time with his Father. It was a life-giving habit for Him."[65]

Mark Bauerlein, in diagnosing our harried souls, points to Jesus as our model of prioritizing silence and solitude, not as ends in themselves, but as opportunities for intimacy with the Father. "It is easy to overlook those moments in the Gospels when Jesus withdraws from others. They come across as pauses, a rest between miracles, parables, and edifying encounters."[66] Yet is it possible these pauses are more than simple respites from "real ministry" and actually constitute something essential and blessed of the Father? The disciples certainly seem to view Jesus' absences in negative terms: "Lord, where have you been?" they exasperatedly demand of Jesus. Yet Jesus refuses to acquiesce to their temporal demands and expectations. The unseen spiritual world is the priority for Jesus. But why?

"It's not about getting away from others but about going toward something else. Jesus isn't alone. He's with the Father."[67] What was true for Jesus—that prayer and solitude fulfilled a sacred purpose—is true for us as well. Times of solitude and prayer, especially at key times of exhaustion, discernment, loneliness, or fear, provide us with much needed refuge and restoration in the midst of our fragmented lives; those times of sacred prayer reconnect us to our source of love, joy, and purpose, while also giving us renewed eternal perspective.

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65. Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 1.

66. Mark Bauerlein, "Prayer in the Facebook Age," First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life; Dec 2014, Issue 248, 17.

67. Mark Bauerlein, "Prayer in the Facebook Age," First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life; Dec 2014, Issue 248, 17.

Scholars note that Jesus tended to be drawn to solitude and prayer either just before major events or decisions, or in response to heavy demands on his time and energy. Here we see almost a "sandwich" approach to ministry in Jesus—"pre-praying" as well as "post-praying"—with solitude and prayer serving as bookend pillars of strength and sustenance for Jesus during demanding times of ministry to others. How appropriate that before seeking God through His Word and in prayer, especially in this loud and busy world, that we enter into a preparatory time of silence.

Gordon Smith wisely adds to this—that it is not just an external discipline of removing ourselves from people and sitting in quiet—no, that is merely the context and the environment for us truly to enter into communion with God. He writes, "not only do we need to learn how to listen slowly but, more, we need to learn what it means to listen with heart and mind."[68] Silence and stillness are the initial precursors to hearing, receiving, and communing with God. Choosing silence declares a willingness to block out the ceaseless chatter and incessant demands of our world in order to prepare ourselves to be with God.

David Benner notes the importance of relinquishing control to God in these times of silence and solitude, much like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane ("not my will, but yours be done"). He writes of the temptation, even in solitude, to preserve the "kingdom of self" where "I remain in control, and my willful ways of running my life remain unchallenged. The whole point of the Kingdom of God is to overturn the kingdom of self."[69] Later, Benner asserts that God's love is the only thing capable of breaking through our self-obsession—"I am convinced

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68. Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer, and the Witness of the Spirit,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 1.

69. David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 56.

that one of the most precious gifts God wants to give us is an abiding sense of his divine presence… a loving turning of {our} eyes toward God at all times."[70] Bradley Holt is even more succinct – that by choosing silence, we are giving "loving attention" to God and ourselves.[71] Silence, at its best, prepares us to enter deeply into praying the Scriptures, because it declares that God is Lord of our hearts and the process.

Lectio (Reading)

Silence does its work in preparing our hearts and minds to hear more deeply. *Lectio* – reading God's Word – involves hearing God speak to us through the words of Scripture. Indeed, the very word *lectio* derives from the Latin word *lego* meaning "to gather together" and "to pick,"[72] an image connoting agriculture. We glean, we harvest goodness and life from God's Word. After quieting ourselves, the invitation of *lectio divina* beckons to us and we enter into reading God's Word. Any portion of Scripture can be used for *lectio,* but practitioners almost universally recommend short texts. Wilhoit and Howard advise, "read a small, select portion… {keeping} an eye to your relationship and response to the God who is revealed through the text…. As you do this, these impressions will work their way deeper and deeper into your life and will change the way you pray. This is lectio divina."[73]

Immediately apparent is how different this form of reading is from simply obtaining information or Biblical knowledge. Michael Casey writes, "*Lectio Divina* is a technique of

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70. David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will: Aligning Our Hearts with the Heart of God*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 60, 62.

71. Bradley Holt, *Thirsty for God, 2nd edition*, (Augsburg Fortress Publishers 2005), 13.

72. Charlton T. Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrew' Edition of Freund's Latin Diction*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 1046.

73. James C. Wilhoit & Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina, Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life*, (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 62.

prayer and a guide to living. It is a means of descending to the level of the heart and of finding God."[74] Praying the Scripture is not seeking to have our opinions reinforced, but laying ourselves bare before the convicting, challenging, and comforting Word of God. In this way, *Lectio divina* offers us a needed corrective to the "more-is-better" mindset that so often grips our performance-minded church, that somehow quantity trumps quality. Rather than reading vast quantities of the Bible at a time, Eugene Peterson recommends approaching God's Word as a sumptuous feast, reading "ruminative and leisurely, a dalliance with words in contrast to wolfing down information."[75]

This slower, reflective style of reading, however, will likely cause resistance in us. Why? Because our western culture's excesses and over-reliance on "easy information" has dulled our appetite and patience for the knowledge of God. Peterson hearkens back to the time when information was largely transmitted orally, thus making words precious because, in their relative scarcity, every word counted for something. Today, our culture lives almost entirely on the surface with smaller attention spans, paying attention only to news items that are blaring or outrageous enough to rise above the general din. Yet, there is the whole vast world of deeper (and more real) life and spirituality living under the surface. "Deep calls to deep."

Some of this internal resistance to slowing ourselves can be met during the silence that precedes reading. In the stillness, we are relinquishing our own opinions and sense of control. The gentle spirit of silence and attentiveness then spills over into our time in God's Word. We move from "information gathering" to actually seeking God beyond words on a page. Stephen

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74. Casey, Michael. *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina,* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), vi.

75. Peterson, Eugene, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, (Eerdmans, 2009), 3.

Binz writes that *lectio* "requires fully attentive reading…. Our culture is drowned in written words. We tend to read in a hurry, curious to learn more and more. But lectio cannot be hasty."[76] As Ambrose counsels, "We should read not in agitation, but in calm; not hurriedly, but slowly, a few words at a time, pausing in attentive reflection."[77]

Many practitioners of *lectio divina* are honest about our internal resistance to drinking deeply from God's Word and have developed priorities on how best to approach Scripture. Tim Gray employs the metaphor of squeezing grapes to represent reading Scripture. He writes, "picking grapes is tedious and time consuming… So too, the first rung of prayer, the reading (*lectio*) of Scripture, must be done with care and concentration. Readers must make their way carefully through the lines of the text, selecting key words and phrases that stand out to them."[78] Many times, those words or phrases are actually beacons of invitation from the Holy Spirit.

Later, Gray writes of the practicalities of reading: "like any good journalist, when we come to a text, we need to ask ourselves the four basic questions: who, what, when, and where… as simple as such questions may seem, they can pay rich dividends in beginning our dialogue with God."[79] This grounds the reading portion of *lectio* in a firmly Ignatian "kataphatic" style of prayer which uses concrete thoughts and images to inform our prayers.[80] We are engaging our minds, firing our curiosity, seeking the voice of the Spirit through the Word.

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76. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 48-49.

77. Citing Ambrose, Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 49.

78. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 35.

79. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 45.

80. That does not exclude a more "apophatic" approach to prayer and experiencing God within the discipline of *lectio divina*. The anonymous work, *Cloud of Unknowing,* speaks of an ecstatic release from worldly concrete images in simply experiencing the depths of communion with God.

Reading Scripture not only reveals the mind and heart of God, it also begins to reveal our own flawed misconceptions about God and ourselves, and also helps correct and transform us. The Apostle Paul declares that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ"[81] and that transformation happens through the renewal of our mind.[82] Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises,* for example, are based on reading Scripture over and over again, which helps us not only to discern our own emotional baggage, but also to begin recognizing God's voice in the world. Wilhoit and Howard write, "The deeper things of our souls do not readily come to the surface, and the Spirit's voice can be subtle … {but with practice} we come with *our* thoughts and feelings to our reading, the Spirit causes *God's* thoughts and feelings to arise as we read. In time, the Spirit reorders the thoughts and feelings of our heart."[83]

This is a powerful result of steeping ourselves in God's Word – that we actually become more like the person (God) whose words we are reading. Reading God's Word reveals the divine Author's heart, intent, and character until those same qualities are formed in us. This helps counteract the incessant noise and clamor of our world's values: "rather than living on in mindless autopilot, where our pace of life or our addictions to media and distractions pull us from the reality of the moment, we choose, in lectio, to focus on our being present to the present"[84] – what God is saying and doing in the here and now. Stephen Binz agrees: "We limit our understanding of the Holy Spirit's work when we think of inspiration as something that happened only when the original authors wrote the biblical texts. Rather, the work of God's

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81. Romans 10:17.

82. Romans 12:2.

83. Wilhoit, James C. & Howard, Evan B., *Discovering Lectio Divina, Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life,* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 54.

84. Wilhoit, James C. & Howard, Evan B., *Discovering Lectio Divina, Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life,* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 56.

Spirit is an ongoing reality within the inspired works… Through the Holy Spirit, God is addressing his word to us here and now."[85]

Bernard Clairvaux states, "When we prayerfully read the great living book of sacred Scripture, we cannot remain the same. The more we remove obstacles from our way—our impatience, fears, temptations, complacency, and misunderstandings—the more powerfully Scripture will change us."[86]

As we draw closer in relationship to the living God through the testimony of the Bible, the sovereign Holy Spirit uses our time in the Scriptures to do powerful works of transformation in us. Peterson writes, "The challenge—never negligible—regarding the Christian Scriptures is getting them read, but read on their own terms, as God's revelation."[87]

What of the possibility of subjective interpretation? That as fallible, self-focused human beings, we would be prone to twist the holy narrative of Scripture to fit our own stories and interpretation? As Wilhoit and Howard ask rhetorically, "isn't lectio divina a bit dangerous, just allowing anybody (or any group) to sit in front of a Bible, read a little passage and get out of it what comes up in their mind?... What is to keep them from heresy?"[88]

The great Bible scholar and pietist, Phillip Spener, anticipates this very question. He writes, "First of all, the principal points of doctrine and rules of life are given in the Scriptures so clearly and according to the letter that each uneducated person can learn and comprehend them

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85. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 27.

86. Citing Bernard Clairvaux in Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 23.

87. Peterson, Eugene, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading,* (Eerdmans, 2009), xi.

88. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina,* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 69.

as well as the learned… as they continue to read the Scriptures with meditation and prayer, God the Holy Spirit will open their understanding more and more…" [89] Spener not only trusted in the Holy Spirit to guide God's people into all truth[90] but also believed strongly in communal discernment of theology and practice.[91]

Meditatio (Meditation)

If reading Scripture is biting into the Word, meditation is chewing and digesting it, making it distinctively a part of our being. Biblical meditation is not the Buddhist emptying of our mind, but rather allowing God's word to *capture* our mind, eventually taking captive our heart, will, and emotions. As Guigo says, "Reading is like a first foundation; it gives us matter for meditation. Meditation seeks more diligently what is to be sought. It is like the digging that finds a treasure."[92] Luke tells us of how Mary "treasured" the words of Simeon, "pondering them in her heart."[93]

As established in chapter 2, meditation is very much a Biblical concept, yet suffers from many misconceptions in our modern, especially evangelical, church context. One evangelical watch group warns of potential heresy in *lectio divina*, writing of "mantric-like repetition … directly related to the contemplative spirituality of which Lighthouse Trails is opposed to."[94]

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89. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 69.

90. John 16:13.

91. This aspect of community discernment and prayer will be addressed in greater length near the conclusion of this chapter.

92. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 59.

93. Luke 2:19.

94. Lighthouse Trails Editors, Lighthouse Trailers Research Project, "LECTIO DIVINA – What it is, What it is not, and Should Christians Practice it?" July 24, 2015. http://www.lighthousetrailsresearch.com/blog/?tag=lectio-divina, , accessed June 1, 2019.

Tim Gray likewise writes of misconceptions of meditation "such as breathing techniques and sitting positions found in yoga… an attempt to get outside and beyond the 'thinking mind' and into a state of relaxation of consciousness."[95] Alistair McGrath warns that meditating without Scripture leads to delusion.[96] So, too, if in our natural though process, we meditate on the wrong things – our worries, fears, resentments, or mindless noodlings.

While there is undoubtedly a subjective and personal element to meditation (Stephen Binz describes it in terms of, "what does the text say to me?"), pure Biblical meditation is centered around the eternal, unchanging Word of God. This does not indicate that meditation is a substitute for academic study, careful exegesis, and communal discernment. In fact, all are needed for a clear appreciation, understanding, and application of the Word of God. Preaching God's Word is one of the clearest examples of the need for comprehensive thoroughness – that exegetical research, devotional time in Scripture, and Bible study can actually harmonize wonderfully with deep meditations on God's Word. Through all these disciplines, the student of the Word stands over, next to, and under Scripture until it does its full work in us and through us.

As we have explored, spiritual transformation, according to Romans 12:2, is through the *renewing*, not the emptying, of our minds. This transformation of our thoughts is a necessary corrective of our fallen humanity because people "became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened."[97]

Biblical meditation, however, goes far deeper than employing our minds. Meditation is a posture of deep surrender, of giving God access to every part of our being. Paul writes, "the

95. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, Ascension Press, January 12, 2009, 59.

96. Alistair McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 85.

97. Romans 1:20.

Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God."[98] While we "ponder," "ruminate," and "reflect" upon the passage of Scripture we have read, the Spirit is also brooding over us, revealing truth and revelation in a personal way. We enter into discernment and wrestling that stirs the mind, but also engages the heart – indeed, "the pondering of *meditatio* combines head and heart."[99]

Meditation is not a time to problem-solve or even to fully understand our situation, but rather to sit with and reflect upon the deep truths of God. Benner writes of the temptation to seek answers to all of our questions and doubts as we meditate, but because the person praying "understands prayer as communion with God, he does not try to solve these questions himself."[100]

Yet out of our communion with God, genuine transformation occurs. We bring our questions, our doubts, our fears, and our hopes to God, offering up those words or phrases of Scripture that draw our attention, and then invite God to meet us and do His divine work in us through His Word. Wilhoit and Howard identify this process as "*intentional* meditation"[101] by which we surrender not only our preconceived notions about God and ourselves, but actually invite the Spirit of God to intercede on our behalf, to meet us in the deep recesses of our heart. There are simple ways we can assist in this process, according to Wilhoit and Howard, things like opening up our palms in a posture of surrender, recognizing what our body is communicating, and viscerally entering into the Biblical text with all five senses.

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98. 1 Corinthians 2:10.

99. David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will: Aligning Our Hearts with the Heart of God*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 53.

100. David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will: Aligning Our Hearts with the Heart of God*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 89.

101. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 78.

Binz affirms asking God questions that naturally arrive out of the text or out of our hearts. In this attitude of curiosity, "often we will notice that rather than our questioning the Scriptures, they are questioning us…. 'What attitudes or habits must I change?' 'Why am I so resistant to reflecting on this text?'… these questions should respond to all levels of the personality: the intellectual, the affective, and the behavioral—the head, the heart, and the hands."[102]

Meditating upon Scripture also reveals the many layers of God's Word. The Hebrew word, *hagah,* means to meditate, to reflect deeply upon God's Word. The prophet Isaiah uses this same word to describe a lioness growling (or, literally "meditating") over her prey. Gray writes that meditation "is an invitation to 'delight' in His Word. Like Isaiah's lion, the mind seeks solid meat to meditate on."[103]

It's no coincidence that much of Scripture (especially the Psalms and Jesus' stories and parables) involve such arresting and familiar imagery – for example, "at the heart of Psalm 1 stands the arboreal profile, looming tall above all else. Beside this image is the flowing stream, which brings life-giving water."[104] The picture of the tree with its leaves and fruit would have stirred powerful emotions in the hearts of its Middle Eastern readers, with its hot and arid climate. Jeremiah applies this same vivid image of the tree planted next to living waters, but in the context of national upheaval and struggle. Even then, under such distress, "its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought."[105]

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102. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 64.

103. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 64.

104. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 65.

105. Jeremiah 17:8.

Tim Gray recognizes Mary sitting at Jesus' feet[106] as a pure picture of Biblical meditation. She is literally sitting under "the Word" and soaking in the presence of her Savior.[107] Her sister Martha on the other hand is "anxious," which chokes out her ability to be fully present with Jesus. But as we sit with this passage, as we enter into meditation, we are compelled to examine the anxious thoughts that keep each of us from being with Christ and "meditating" more deeply on His love and grace. Notably, even in Jesus' gentle rebuke of Martha, "notice that He repeats Martha's name, which is characteristic for Jesus when He is speaking to those He loves."[108] In our efforts and struggles to meditate upon our Lord, even then we are invited to hear Jesus repeat *our* name – to be assured that He loves us and invites us to be with Him.

Ultimately, "meditating on the truth of Scripture works a healing in our being – the promises, hopes and truths of Scripture work their way into our being—and we develop a habit of turning to lifegiving thoughts of truth."[109]

Oratio **(Praying)**

Reading (lectio) is about what the text says; meditation is about what the text is saying to us personally; prayer raises the question, "what do I want to say to God after reading and reflecting on this text?"[110] We listen to God, we reflect on His Word, and then we respond through prayer.

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106. Luke 10.

107. This is also a beautiful picture of "contemplation" – becoming captivated by the beauty of her Lord.

108. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 73.

109. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 90.

110. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 71.

This step of prayer continues the spirit of prayer and relational expectancy that began with silence and continued through reading and meditating. Prayer then is "rooted directly in prayerful reading and meditation on the scriptural text… {they} become the words of our prayer."[111] The very words of Scripture give utterance to our own words.

Echoing Mother Teresa's wisdom that the best way to learn to pray is simply to begin praying, Kierkegaard compares prayer to breathing. The one is as important to spiritual life as the other is to physical life. "Those who pray should take heart that the consequences of praying 'wrongly' are not dire"[112] in that, just like any skill, we are bound to fail along the way, but will learn from our mistakes if we do not give up. Kierkegaard, early in his spiritual pilgrimage, had conceived of prayer as a way of securing the blessings of God for oneself. This is why prayer itself was such a gift, he believed; it was a means for receiving more gifts. Such a view of prayer, of course, relates well to the metaphor of how children learn to relate to their parents, beginning in mostly a self-centered position. Kierkegaard's view of prayer evolved, however, as "he began to conceive of prayer as a form of submission. The sheer difficulty of remaining counter-culturally Christian in blasé Christendom invites struggle in one's public life, but quiet contemplation, even silence, in personal prayer. Prayer is a quiet handing over of all things to God."[113]

While this kind of quiet prayer steeped in submission and surrender may represent a desired goal for some, the models of prayer we see throughout Scripture rarely are so staid and

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111. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 72.

112. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 72.

113. Steven M. Emmanuel, *Volume 15, Tome V: Kierkegaard's Concepts: Objectivity to Sacrifice (Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources),* (Routledge; 1 edition, March 18, 2016), 108.

"quiet." The psalmists and prophets rage, they weep, they pour out to God their rawest selves in prayer. It is hard to picture Jeremiah or a troubled King David gently folding their hands, closing their eyes, and using King James language to address God. Rather than upsetting us by its coarse, even violent, language, this passionate style of prayer gives radical permission for us to "come exactly as we are" in prayer to the Lord.

The Psalms—the prayer book of the Bible—model this especially profoundly. Every range of human emotion and experience is on full display. Particularly jarring to some modern sensibilities are the "imprecatory" Psalms which even include praying for the destruction of not only one's enemies, but even their innocent children! [114] Jan Johnson writes, "the Psalmists remind us that there is room for passion in our life with God. For too long the passion in the Gospels has been ignored. I've tried to picture Jesus saying, 'you brood of vipers!' with a calm, detached look, and it doesn't ring true."[115] Philip Yancey adds, "I challenge skeptics to find a single argument used against God by the great agnostics—Voltaire, Dave Humbe, Bertrand Russell—that is not already included in such Biblical books as Habakkuk, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and yes, Job. These strong passages from the Bible express the anguish of dislocation: of hurt and betrayal, of life that doesn't make sense."[116]

Though this "passionate" approach to prayer may seem unfamiliar to some at first, could it ultimately become a liberating pathway to greater, more authentic connection in our prayer lives? Even our angry accusations, our befuddled questions, and our selfish petitions can be authentic and honest "gateway" prayers to greater intimacy. As Walter Brueggemann, in his

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114. Psalm 137.

115. Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God*, Jan Johnson, (Navpress, 1996), 55.

116. Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, (Zondervan 2006), 40.

Praying the Psalms, declares, "my hunch is that there is a way *beyond* the Psalms of vengeance, but it is a way *through* them and not *around* them."[117]

Even as the Psalms and the Prophets (along with other Scriptures) give us permission to approach God in prayer with our every emotion, so too do we find invitation to negotiate, even argue, with God. We see it with Abraham advocating for Sodom,[118] Moses as he pleads for the Israelites,[119] King Hezekiah as he prays for God's healing,[120] and Mary requesting Jesus' help at the wedding at Cana. Arguing and negotiating with God—far from being presumptuous—actively engages us mind, body, soul in dialogue and relationship with the living God; it fulfills the notion that prayer is relational rather than transactional. We don't argue with an abstraction or an aloof, dispassionate God; rather, we wrestle and engage the living God with a bold, active, zealous faith. And as Jacob discovered at Jabokk,[121] tremendous blessings can come from wrestling with the Almighty.

Rather than coaxing a reluctant and unyielding God to act, the Psalmist is praying the very words of God's own heart and purposes. "In the very process of arguing, we may in fact take on God's own qualities. 'Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance," writes Archbishop Trench; 'it is laying hold of his highest willingness.'"[122]

As we discover in *lectio divina*, prayer soon proves the resistance of our very selves. We cannot truly be honest with God if we are not honest with ourselves. James Houston writes,

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117. Walter Bruggeman, *Praying the Psalms*, (St. Mary's Press, 1986), 79.

118. Genesis 18:16-32.

119. Exodus 32:9-14.

120. 2 Kings 20:1-11.

121. Genesis 32:22-32.

122. Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, (Zondervan, 2006), 95.

"knowing ourselves is usually uncomfortable. This is why so many people live inside masks to prevent others from discovering the uncomfortable truths they have found out about themselves. … This is where prayer cuts across all our pretensions. Prayer is the mirror of the soul, and in it we see ourselves most clearly."[123]

That is both the resistance we face and the beckoning opportunity of approaching God sincerely in prayer. Through reading and meditation, we have quieted and opened ourselves to God through the refining fire of His Word and allowed the Spirit to integrate our minds with our hearts – "what is God saying to me?" In prayer, we respond to God's words, we listen, we intercede, we argue. "In all areas of our life, prayer is the one where we can least afford to be complacent… We dedicate enormous effort toward developing our professional skills through expensive education, yet our time and our communion with God has become a lost art and a rejected relationship."[124]

Andre van Oudtshoorn posits that honest, heartfelt prayers serve eventually to reorient and realign ourselves to God's perspective. "We pray not for God's sake, but for our own. We pray because voicing our praise, expressing our need and offering our thanks and prayers helps us to know who we are before God and all others."[125]

Yet we are also confronted by the mystery of prayer's efficacy and purpose, an argument that transcends the academic debate between Calvinist and Arminian theology. Namely: does prayer only change the one praying? Or does it somehow also change God? Oudtshoorn regards God not as aloof and unchangeable; rather, God is "the personal, active responder to our

123. James Houston, *Prayer, the Transforming Friendship*, (Navpress, 1996), 29.

124. James Houston, *Prayer, the Transforming Friendship*, (Navpress, 1996), 26.

125. Andre van Oudtshoorn, *Prayer and Practical Theology,* DOI 10.1515/ijpt-2012-0018 IJPT 2012; 289.

prayers.[126] As we witness the honest, desperate prayers of Abraham, Moses, the Psalmist, even Jesus Himself, perhaps the question is not one of prayer's efficacy so much as a question of intimacy and relationship. Prayer "is grounded on the faith that God 'is'; that God is a willing listener to our prayers; that God is committed to act in response to our prayers to transform the world and that God does so because God is willing to invite us, as people in our own right, into fellowship with Himself to participate with God in the historical outworking of a greater plan for the world."[127]

In this sense, prayer may be best understood and enjoyed as relational rather than transactional. The question of prayer's efficacy appeals more to God's character and desire for relationship and intimacy than in producing external vending machine-like results. This kind of relational prayer communicates with God as a dynamic person rather than a genie in a bottle. How might prayer be liberated when approached in terms of friendship:[128] enjoying one another's company, dialoguing with one another, considering each other's perspectives, while always in the greater context of recognizing God as sovereign Lord? "The joy of feeling close to God. … This is precisely why Christians pray, why Christians give themselves body and soul to the beautiful struggle that is prayer: to feel themselves drawn into the great joy of God's presence, to see their lives transformed by that joy, and to bear witness to the power of joy to heal a broken world."[129]

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126. Andre van Oudtshoorn, *Prayer and Practical Theology*, DOI 10.1515/ijpt-2012-0018 IJPT 2012; 289.

127. Andre van Oudtshoorn, *Prayer and Practical Theology*, DOI 10.1515/ijpt-2012-0018 IJPT 2012; 293-294.

128. described by Jesus in John 15:15.

129. Douglas e. Ghristie, "The Joy of Feeling Close to God: The Practice of Prayer and the Work of Accompaniment," (Anglican Theological Review, ATWQ5A), 606.

None of this is to deny that prayer also changes us in powerful ways. As Henri Nouwen writes, "sitting in the presence of God for one hour each morning—day after day, week after week, and month after month, in total confusion and with a myriad of distractions—radically changes my life."[130] This kind of spiritual transformation into Christ's likeness comes not from our own efforts, but from making every part of ourselves available to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' disciples, simply by virtue of their Jewish upbringing, would have known how to pray, at least according to certain rote standards. But something about witnessing Jesus' prayers stirred their hearts in unfamiliar ways. "No one in the Old Testament directly addressed God as 'Father,' whereas Jesus did so 170 times. The model prayer he gave deals with the stuff of daily life—God's will, food, debts, forgiveness, temptation—and his own prayers showed a spontaneous communion with the Father that had no precedent. His disciples, no novices at prayers themselves, marveled at the difference."[131]

RC Sproul adds, "I have always been amazed that the disciples didn't ask Jesus how to walk on water, how to still the tempest, or how to do any of His other miracles. They did, however, ask Jesus to teach them about prayer. Note that they did not ask Jesus to teach them *how* to pray; instead they begged, 'Teach us *to* pray."[132] Sproul concludes, "I'm certain that the disciples clearly saw the inseparable relationship between the power Jesus manifested and the hours He spent in solitude, conversing with His Father."[133]

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130. Cited in Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, (Zondervan, 2006), 153.

131. Philip Yancey, *Prayer*, (Zondervan, 2006), 63.

132. Luke 11:1.

133. RC Sproul, *Does Prayer Change Things?* (Reformation Trust Publishing, 2009), 22.

Contemplatio (Contemplation)

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after … to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.[134]

Whereas the first three movements of *lectio divina* involves words (hearing and speaking), "contemplation is prayer with few words. It is the response to God that remains after words are no longer necessary or helpful… simply enjoying the presence of quietly being in God's presence."[135]

This sense of joy from being in God's presence permeates Scripture. King David recognizes his desire for God and also exults in His lifegiving presence: "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water… Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you."[136] Our souls are not only intrinsically drawn towards God, but God Himself actively draws us. He desires that we experience divine intimacy with Him. King David writes, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."[137]

Yet, of all the elements of *lectio divina*, contemplation may be the most difficult not only to encapsulate in words, but also to practice in our modern world. It has little western frame of reference; while reading, reflection, and prayer may be increasingly scarce in our culture, they are at least identifiable concepts to most people. Contemplation, however, defies our modern

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134. Psalm 27:4.

135. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 85-86.

136. Psalm 63:1&3.

137. Psalm 16:11.

sensibilities; it does not easily line up with our pursuit of efficiency, results, and purpose. How do we quantify intimacy with the divine? How do we measure relationship with a God whose thoughts and ways are so much higher than ours?[138]

Stephen Binz writes, "In Western society, we define people primarily by their *doing* rather than their *being*... {But} because contemplation demands that we let go of any effort to be 'in charge' of our lives, it is more difficult for us to practice today than in previous ages."[139] Yet the invitation to enjoy God at the deepest level beckons us. Indeed, it is what we have been created for and is a harbinger of eternity's joys.

Many practitioners of *lectio divina* disagree with Guigo's chronological and spiritual ordering of prayer. There is an inherent realism, however, about the need to till the soil of the human heart as a precursor to contemplation, as difficult as that can be in our fragmented world. We must enter into this sort of prayer by faith. As we engage deeply in reading Scripture, meditating upon its truths, and bringing our personal lives and reality in prayer, we are drawn, we are changed, we are transformed to behold the divine in wordless wonder. Tim Gray writes, "Like gardening, prayer takes planting, tending, and harvest before we taste the fruits of our labors."[140] We taste and see that the Lord is good and desire Him more and more. As Guigo the Carthusian puts it, contemplation "tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness… Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it."[141]

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138. Isaiah 55:8-9.

139. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 86-87.

140. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 91.

141. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 91.

But while we dare not say contemplation is only for the few, we must also acknowledge the struggle and the mystery of it. Michael Casey writes that contemplation is "a gift from God that is not automatically associated with particular human acts."[142] For a species that likes to control and dictate the terms, contemplation represents surrender at its apex for us. "For some people," Casey says, "the conditions will obtain quickly; in others, it takes a lifetime of struggle and confusion to arrive at the point of being willing to accept what God desires to give."[143]

A helpful Biblical truth and reminder is that the gift of contemplation comes to us through God's grace – His unmerited favor. Paul, in evangelizing the Athenians, sees their idols with the inscription "to an unknown god" – they are seeking for that which they do not know. Paul then assures them, "he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being.'"[144] God is not only our Creator, He is also the God who has come near, who sustains us and indwells us. This sense of "mutual presence is the hidden ground of *lectio divina*."[145] We choose to make ourselves available to God, we earnestly seek him, "we are simply present ourselves to God and God completes the work. What happens in contemplation is God's grace."[146]

If contemplation, then, is a gift based on God's grace, then we must come openhanded ready to receive and enter into "the enjoyment of life with our Beloved."[147] In contemplation we

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142. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), 59.

143. Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading, The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori/Triumph 1995), 59.

144. Acts 17:27-28.

145. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 111.

146. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 91.

147. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 121.

experience a return of sorts to Eden – where God walked in relational intimacy with Adam and Eve. Contemplation is an earthly fulfillment of not only our human longing, but also God's: "that I would be their God and they would be my people."

Tim Gray writes of the profound results of contemplative prayer – that we come "to see the natural world as a sacrament of the supernatural."[148] Once we have tasted and experienced this sort of intimacy with our Creator, a spirit of contemplation spills over into the world—even the broken, fallen, fragmented parts—as we learn to recognize God incarnate all around us. King David, surely a contemplative, recognized God in all of creation around Him – "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge."[149] But David also recognized the very personal and intimate nature of God, that He even knits us together in our mother's womb and knows all of our thoughts.[150] In contemplation, we approach the grandeur *and* the intimate care of God, surrendering and receiving his great love for us.[151] "During contemplation, we become the receiver, with God, so to speak, acting within and upon us."[152]

Steven Binz encourages cultivating an interior atmosphere for contemplation and appropriately brings the one praying full circle back into silence. Where *lectio divina* began with a silence seeking to quiet the noise and distractions of the world, the silence of contemplation is "simply the enjoyment of life with our Beloved."[153] It's the blessed silence of knowing and

148. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 95.

149. Psalm 19:1.

150. Psalm 139.

151. Zephaniah 3:17.

152. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 96.

153. James Wilhoit & Evan Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), 121.

being known, and it happens only after deep relational connection has been cultivated through the other forms of prayer. Binz concludes, "the more we practice *lectio divina*, the more we will begin to relish this period of silence."[154] The heart of contemplation is abiding in the deep love of Christ. Bernard of Clairvaux affirms that as we gaze upon God, we are able to see and love ourselves the same way God does.[155]

Incarnatio (Action)

Lectio Divina is transforming to our souls. But we are also summoned by the Gospel to live out our faith, to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the church and to the world. Steven Binz writes, "Through *lectio divina*… we build bridges between the text and daily life"[156] Tim Gray likewise affirms, for "*lectio divina* to really bear fruit that lasts,[157] it must result in a life of virtue. The Word must be 'made flesh' again and again in our daily lives."[158]

Lectio Divina is a powerful resource in helping cultivate a healthy relationship with the living God and in community with one other. From that deep relationship with God, eternal fruit can be produced through our lives. This, of course, requires a step of faith for the people of God that prayer will not simply be an "add-on" to an already busy plate. No, prayer is a bedrock of relationship with the Living God, the foundation by which genuine spiritual fruit can result. The final step of the *lectio divina* process is "incarnating" our faith in tangible ways. Teresa of Avila

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154. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 8.

155. Mark Harris, *Companions for your Spiritual Journey*, (Regent College Publishing 2005), 79.

156. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 95.

157. John 15:16.

158. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 109-11.

affirms "that your foundation consist of more than prayer and contemplation. If you do not strive for the virtues and practice them, you will always be dwarfs."[159]

If there is danger in the spiritual life, it is that in our desire and quest to be shaped more into the image of Christ, we take on the burden of attempting that transformation ourselves through "righteous" acts such as praying, fasting, reading Scripture, and serving others. No, those are out-workings of a changed and redeemed heart. Eugene Peterson speaks of the leavening of the Holy Spirit to activate God's transforming truth within us: "Christians don't simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus' name…"[160]

In other words, it is through the transforming ministry of the Holy Spirit (including through God's Word and prayer), that we are inwardly transformed in order that we can outwardly manifest God's love, grace, and truth in our world. Tim Gray wisely counsels, "If we spend time meditating and learning about holiness and virtue, the danger is that we will think we have acquired these qualities simply because we have thought about them, when in reality we have yet to attain them."[161] David Benner identifies this reciprocal nature of *lectio divina* –that it is "life as prayer, prayer as life." Inspired by the prayer life of Basil Pennington, Benner writes, "his times of prayer were far from limited to these many hours each day spent in *lectio divina*, the Liturgy of the Hours or centering prayer. These things simply served as the framework that

159. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Ouho Rodriguez, OCD (Mahwah, N.J.: Pauhst Press, 1979), 191.

160. Peterson, Eugene, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, (Eerdmans, 2009), 18.

161. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 114-115.

allowed his prayerful, attentive openness to God to flow out of the rest of the day."[162]

Frank Laubach, certainly an active man in his own right, was also a mystic who bathed everything in prayer: "We learn to ask God to think His thoughts in us. Instead of telling God what we want from Him, ask Him what He wants us to do."[163] This is a prayer principle for our prayer closet as well as our public life—that nothing is off limits in our ceaseless prayers to God. Waiting in line is an opportunity to "be still and know I am God;"[164] getting cut off on the highway by an impatient driver is an invitation to pray for someone's ragged soul; receiving a dreaded health diagnosis a call to pray (and trust) authentically. As Jan Johnson encourages, "a troubled coworker is a person to pray for, not just an obstacle."[165] Later, Johnson concludes, "our problem is not lack of time, but failure to value the moment and to see God at work in it."[166]

Lectio in Today's Modern World?

While the authentic, honest form of prayer called *lectio divina* may be liberating and transforming, it also is countercultural. The call to prayer, in this hyperactive world, seems almost a mockery, especially prayer as yet one more thing to squeeze into our over-the-top schedule. Daniel Yankelovich speaks of a recent cultural shift that has exacerbated this trend. For many decades, society valued deferred gratification. Couples saved for big purchases, spouses made sacrifices for the long-term future; parents stayed together for the sake of the children. But "in the 1970's the rules changed: the self-denial ethic morphed into a self-

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162. David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will: Aligning Our Hearts with the Heart of God,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 156.

163. Frank Laubach, *Channels of Spiritual Power,* (Westwood, NJ.: Revell, 1954), 97.

164. Psalm 46.

165. Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God*, (Navpress, 1996), 31.

166. Tim Gray, *Praying Scripture for a Change*, (Ascension Press, 2009), 70.

fulfillment ethic… We listen to our emotional needs and want them fulfilled now, without sacrifice, without waiting… Under the new rules, prayer loses out."[167] This is ironic, because in John 10:10 (in a passage centered on hearing and recognizing God's voice), Jesus spoke of a "life abundant" available to all of his followers. Our desperate quest for personal happiness and fulfillment takes us in so many temporal and unsatisfying directions, "yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."[168] As Pastor Jim Cymbala observes, this is true not only of individuals, but also of churches: "Sadly, many churches live miles below their God-ordained potential because they waste time investigating every church-growth method except the one outlined in the Bible… God wants his house to be called 'a house of prayer.'"[169]

This, of course, leads us to ask whether *lectio divina* fits in the midst of busyness and everyday life. Put another way: is it possible to maintain a *Mary spirit* of choosing Jesus even in those times of busyness and fullness of schedule? The answer rests on this foundational truth—that God is both initiator and sustainer of our spiritual formation. That serves both as promise and invitation for us: that true life abundant always revolves around relationship with God – our response and acceptance of God's initiative and invitation.

What is Lectio Divina's Role in the Church?

People are God's method, not techniques and programs.[170]

Is the church today satisfied, or does it yet thirst for the living God? Bernard of Clairvaux writes probingly, "The thirsty soul eagerly prolongs its contact with Scripture,

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167. James Houston, *Prayer, the Transforming Friendship*, (Navpress, 1996), 164.

168. John 5:40.

169. Jim Cymbala, *Breakthrough Prayer*, (Zondervan 2003), 81.

170. Ben Patterson, *Deepening Your Conversation with God*, (Bethany House, 2001), 29.

certain to find there the one for whom it thirsts."[171] This connects to the promise of God not only slaking our thirst, but also accomplishing everything He desires through the sending out of His Word.[172] Stephen Binz carries this same theme forward, "As the rain and snow fall to the earth, they meet a yearning receptivity…, if we listen and open our hearts, eventually that word will penetrate the parched soil of our lives. Not only will God's word refresh us and help us to grow, it will cause us to bear the fruit that God intends for us to share."[173]

Spirituality is lived out and finds its greatest expression in community. So much of Scripture's words, commands, encouragements and admonitions are directed to the plural "you." We are the people of God, the Body of Christ, the church universal. One of the primary dangers of spirituality is that we become isolated or solitary in our faith journey. And the temptations to choose or isolate oneself from community are great; after all, community is made up of people—needy, annoying, broken, hurt and hurtful, angry, bitter, and so on. As Peterson writes, "I often found myself preferring the company of people outside my congregation, men and women who did not follow Jesus. Or worse, preferring the company of my sovereign self. But I soon found that my preferences were honored by neither Scripture nor Jesus."[174]

But somehow, through community, we discover that Christ dwells in the very midst of the mess, *our* mess. And it is in community that we recognize most clearly how much we all need a Savior, for not only do we see our neighbor's faults up-close-and-personal, but the constant irritating rub against others exposes our own foibles, limitations, and sinfulness as well.

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171. Citing Bernard of Clairvaux in Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 35.

172. Isaiah 55:1, 10-11.

173. Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina,* (Word Among Us Press, 2008), 98.

174. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, Eerdmans, 2008, 63.

And then we are invited to treat our neighbors, especially the "least of these," as Christ Himself because that is how Christ has loved us.

What, then, does this community look like? Paradoxically, Peterson speaks of "holiness," quoting Gerald Manley Hopkins' definition of "holy" community as "the dearest freshness deep down things"[175] There's a fire, an "aliveness" about holy community. The Levitical "Holiness" code, as only a system of external rules and regulations, became spiritually deadening to the people; it actually drove them away from intimacy with God. Yet, at the same time, they revealed to us a holy God who calls us to live differently (and far more purposefully) than the norms of culture. Holiness calls us to rise above culture's values and wisdom in our God-communities.

Finally, and most importantly, "love" is at the center of community. "This is my command: Love each other," says Jesus. [176] Dallas Willard shares the story of Mother Teresa bringing an "untouchable" who was close to death into her shelter to be cared for and cleaned (in short, granted dignity). He said, "I have had to live my life like an animal, but now I can die like a human being."[177]

Indeed, Willard affirms that all spiritual formation is necessarily social. He writes, "Anyone who thinks of it as merely a private matter has misunderstood it… For all that is between me and God affects who I am; and that, in turn, modifies my relationship to everyone around me."[178] If, by spiritual formation, we mean becoming more like Jesus' character, then it

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175. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, (Eerdmans, 2008), 229.

176. John 15:17.

177. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ*, (NavPress, 2012), 183.

178. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ*, (NavPress, 2012),182.

seems His love and compassion should be increasing hallmarks of our own character. As McGrath so aptly sums up, "spirituality is about *doing*, not just thinking or reflecting."[179] Jesus affirms, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."[180]

In this age of virtual connections, fragmented attention spans, and impatient time frames, people remain hungry for authentic connection. Traditionally the church has trumpeted a rather vague definition of community as the antidote to loneliness and purposelessness. But Augustine's prescient words come to mind, that "you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." Would a community immersed in prayer and connected to our Creator and to one another be the antidote to this rootless, desperately lonely culture? We see a convincing picture of this in the early church as the fledging community of new Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."[181]

Once again, Jesus reveals our model and inspiration. Jesus was just as likely to pray among others as he was to seek solitude. Like Jesus, we too can choose to immerse everything and everyone in our prayers. Surely that is the meaning behind Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing"[182] until "conversing with God becomes part of the rhythm of our lives, a backdrop to all activity, so that our heart becomes our private chapel."[183]

In Chapter 4, we will apply these biblical and formational truths to my local church context, Olivet Lutheran Church, an active, Biblical, thriving body of believers. Yet, many are

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179. Alistair McGrath, *Christian Spirituality,* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 174.

180. John 13:35.

181. Acts 2:42.

182. 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

183. Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God*, (Navpress, 1996), 28.

seeking and thirsty for a deeper experience and taste of the Lord's goodness. During the Lenten season, a time already set apart for self-reflection, prayer, and repentance, a group of believers will enter into a 40-day season of *lectio divina* as a church community. How will God meet His people in this sacred time of prayer, reflection, and journey together?

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT AND ANALYSIS

Hypothesis

Believers who desire to grow spiritually and are willing to regularly engage in the spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* (praying the Scriptures) can achieve spiritual growth that is measurable and observable. Therefore, teaching and equipping members of Olivet Lutheran Church in *lectio divina* will help promote spiritual growth.

Introduction

Lectio Divina is a time-honored practice of prayer that finds its roots in the Hebrew and New Testament Scriptures and was later formalized in the Christian church. *Lectio divina* consists of four main aspects – reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation[1] and brings Scripture and prayer together in a way that deeply personalizes our relationship with God. Through this style of prayer, we listen, we respond, and we draw near to God as He also draws near to us.

The metaphor of a garden is instructive for God's people -- that just as fruitful growth in a garden takes time, so does spiritual growth. Alan Fadling describes it as the "unhurried life" of pilgrimage with God: "The genuine productivity of the Spirit is the fruit of an unhurried orientation to God and to people."[2] Rather than being "results-oriented," *lectio divina* is primarily "relationship-oriented."

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1. This thesis also suggests two additional aspects – *silencio* (silence) at the beginning and *incarnatio* (action) at the end.

2. Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 44.

At its best, *lectio divina* invites and begins to restore us to that blessed union with God, first experienced in the Garden of Eden and in the continuing heart of our Father, that "I would be their God and they would be my people." Particularly in this harried, stressful world we inhabit, *lectio divina* gives us permission and freedom to put aside pressure for results and to *achieve* in favor of simply *being* with God through His Word—to ruminate (if desired) on one passage, one verse, even one word for lengthy periods. And in that form of prayer, the peaceful fruit of relationship with the living God grows and flourishes.

A presupposition of this prayer journey is that an encounter with the living God changes and transforms us, both as individuals and as community – His holy people. Paul writes that "we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (II Corinthians 3:18). *Lectio divina* then can be a powerful method of prayer by which we can fulfill our creation-born desire for intimacy and relationship with God and with one another.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe my project, a prayer journey called "Praying the Scriptures" offered to congregants at Olivet Lutheran Church who have expressed desire to grow spiritually. The purpose of this project is to introduce this largely unfamiliar but transforming method of prayer to members of our congregation.

Project Description and Rationale

Olivet Lutheran Church blends historical Lutheran roots and theology with a distinctively evangelical approach to ministry. This can be seen in its diverse demographic population, multiple styles of worship and liturgical focus, and an openness to a wide variety of ministry emphases. Olivet's membership, especially in recent years, has become a melting pot of many different theological and church backgrounds.

My role as Olivet's Pastor of Discipleship includes responsibility to promote spiritual formation for all ages. I also personally represent Olivet's "melting pot" culture, having served churches in three different denominations and three different countries. I have an inherent appreciation for traditional approaches to worship, discipleship, and ministry, but also enjoy inviting people into new ministry experiences. *Lectio divina* represents both an ancient and new prayer practice for many people.

Olivet, as stated, is a very active church and offers many varied spiritual opportunities for discipleship and service, including Bible studies and prayer groups. Most of these groups, however, are already well-established and focus on a more "intercessory" style of prayer. Some Olivet congregants (particularly more recent members) have expressed feeling intimidated by these longstanding, settled prayer groups. In addition, because of their primarily intercessory approach to prayer, these established prayer groups do not appeal to those who are longing to grow relationally closer to God through prayer. A separate but connected demographic are those members who have expressed embarrassment at their inability to pray at all beyond the familiar Lutheran liturgy but have a desire to learn and grow in other forms of prayer.

For my project, I designed a 40-day prayer opportunity entitled "Praying the Scriptures: a Lenten Journey" that introduced *lectio divina* as a non-threatening "zero entry" prayer experience to Olivet members, primarily those who have expressed a desire to grow spiritually through prayer. Prayer groups are common at Olivet, but this particular approach to prayer would be unique to most participants.

In preparation for this new ministry offering, I sought to integrate my research and learning in *lectio divina* to make the journey appropriate for our church. I deduced that with Olivet's diverse theological and church background, the Latin words *lectio divina* could be a

draw for some and a barrier for others. I decided to include the history and the meaning behind the words during our teaching time but chose to substitute the more innocuous phrase "Praying the Scriptures."

While teaching and modeling *lectio divina* would be core components of the experience, I wanted to make the journey as experiential as possible for participants. My rationale was that people learn to pray by praying, so the more the people had opportunity to practice and make it their own experience, the more likely they would grow in prayer. This connected to the project's primary objective: to test experientially whether *lectio divina* helped promote spiritual growth among the prayer journey's participants.

The project involved a combination of large group, small group, and individual opportunities to learn and practice *lectio divina*. The daily component of praying with *lectio divina* generally involved a personal, individual time of prayer. Therefore, I emphasized opportunities to pray communally and in small groups during our sessions together as a counterbalance.

I chose the season of Lent to host this prayer journey, recognizing Lent as a season of the church calendar when many people are seeking to grow spiritually and perhaps are more open to new spiritual experiences. I was aware of the participants' busy individual and family schedules, and also of the very full church ministry calendar, so I set the class on the same day as our Wednesday Lenten meal and worship service. That allowed people simply to arrive at church an hour early for the class and then stay on for the dinner and worship service afterwards. This 5:00 pm starting time proved tight but possible for working individuals.

I chose 40 days of prayer as a length for a few interconnected reasons. First, I wanted the project to have a defined length of time with a clear beginning and end. Ministries with a fixed

timeline often hold more appeal to busy people and those leery of commitment (particularly beginning an unfamiliar prayer practice). While my hope was that participants would continue to use *lectio divina* as part of their prayer life beyond the 40 days, I was unable to continue developing and leading this class indefinitely due to my own busy ministry. The end of 40 days would serve as an off-ramp for those ready to finish but could be a new beginning for those who desired to continue.[3]

I also was cognizant of the prevalence of the number 40 in Scripture and its strong connection to spiritual opportunity, change, and transformation. The Israelites wandered for 40 years in the wilderness – a time of building faith, community and relationship with God. In the days of Noah, the purging rains fell for 40 days and nights upon the earth, while the prophet Jonah declared 40 days before Nineveh would be overthrown. Most well-known, probably, is Jesus' own 40 days in the wilderness just before initiating his public ministry – again, a time of suffering, testing, building faith, and pursuing deeper connection with the Father.

Finally, there is the well-researched psychological reality that habits and lifestyle patterns simply require a time of commitment to establish. Bad habits take time to break; good habits take time to establish. Steve Macchia writes that "spiritual transformation is a lifelong process of becoming more like Christ, reflecting more and more of his image in every aspect of our lives."[4] The implication is that spiritual transformation is a journey more than a destination. The Apostle Paul declares, both hopefully and realistically, that through the agency of the Holy Spirit we are becoming more and more like Jesus. The end result of "Christlikeness" is only completed in us

3. One of the survey questions asked whether people would be interested in continuing to gather around *lectio divina* beyond these 40 days of prayer.

4. Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple, 10 Traits of a Vital Christian*, (Baker Books 2004), 73.

when Jesus returns (Philippians 1:6). Forty days, then, seemed a legitimate length of time to begin a journey of learning to pray God's Word.

Project Design

The prayer journey lasted for six weeks from February 23, 2018 through April 7, 2018. I established a project design consisting of the following elements:

Identify and gather a participant group

I set an initial goal of 20 participants and, around three to four weeks before the class, began contacting potential participants, prioritizing church members who had expressed desire to grow in their prayer life. The invitation list was formed largely based on my own personal interaction with church members, along with some recommendations from the other church staff and small group leaders.

I sought representation from a wide range of congregants (adults only), with as much demographic and spiritual variance as possible. Some categories of diversity included marital status, maturity in faith, prior experience in prayer groups, length of time at Olivet, personality type, and age. The one "golden thread" connecting all participants was a stated or clearly-evident desire to grow in prayer.

I ultimately sent out an initial invitation to around thirty people, assuming some probably could not attend. Invitations were extended by personal email[5]; there were no further announcements or invitations made during worship services or printed in the church bulletin or website. Additional church members, however, soon began hearing of this class and asking if they too could attend. Ultimately, I accepted everyone who requested to join, but simply asked

5. Email text is included in Appendix A.

them not to invite additional participants, believing that the material and format was best-suited to a smaller size group.

Introductory meeting[6]

Prior to the initial kick-off retreat, we gathered together for an informational meeting to introduce *lectio divina* and go over the expectations and parameters of the prayer journey. Thirty-three people attended this introductory gathering. We met in a large classroom for the initial meeting, but immediately realized this was not an environment suited for prayer and reflection. All subsequent plenary sessions were held in the chapel, a space much more conducive to quiet prayer, forming small groups, and interactive teaching.

Elements of this introductory meeting involved giving relevant information to participants, introducing the topic, and giving opportunity to practice *lectio divina* together. I also distributed the spiritual assessment (details below) and the informed consent document at this meeting. I explained my involvement in this degree program and shared logistical details of the project. Per the informed consent document, no financial compensation was offered or provided to any of the participants.

Spiritual assessment tool[7]

At the initial informational meeting, all participants were given a survey questionnaire to gauge their prayer life and spiritual condition using a traditional Lickert scale of measurements. This "Spiritual Life Inventory Questionnaire" consisted of 16 questions covering a wide variety of aspects related to the participant's spiritual life, including quantity of prayer in their daily lives, current satisfaction with their spiritual lives, challenges to their faith, and desire to grow

6. See Appendix B for full description.

7. See Appendix C for full description.

closer to God through prayer. I requested that participants complete the questionnaire prior to the initial Saturday retreat. 28 participants filled out the pre-course questionnaire.

The 16 survey questions were formulated specifically to address maturity in prayer, motivation to grow, and current spiritual condition. The rationale for these particular questions included: providing foundational context, measuring spiritual maturity and relational intimacy, and gauging motivation to grow, particularly in the area of prayer. Respondents were asked to respond on a 1-5 scale:

1- Does not describe me ever

2- Does not describe me much of the time

3- Neutral

4- Describes me much of the time

5- Describes me all the time

The follow-up survey, distributed at the end of the 40 days, contained the same sixteen questions using the same Lickert rating scale. This was to track and assess any changes during the 40 days. Both the beginning and concluding surveys included space for name[8] and date along with additional room at the end to share further details that would help interpret and clarify responses. The first survey also included two contextual questions – "How long have you had a personal relationship with Jesus?" and "How many years have you been attending Olivet?"

Daily prayer journal booklets[9]

Every week, participant received a devotional booklet consisting of a different daily Scripture reading called a "focus verse" based around a particular weekly theme. These themes

8. Participants were also given the option to remain anonymous by choosing a three-digit number to identify themselves for the beginning and concluding surveys. Two availed themselves of this option.

9. Examples of prayer booklets are included in the Appendix D.

all centered on the person and character of God, which also paralleled our church's Lenten focus on cultivating a deeper relationship with God. The themes included:

- **Week #1** (February 21 - 27): God's Identity
- **Week #2** (February 28 - March 6): God's Creation
- **Week #3** (March 7 - 13): God's Promises
- **Week #4** (March 14 - 20): God's LOVE
- **Week #5** (March 21 - 27): *God with Us*: Jesus
- **Week #6** (March 28 - April 4): *God in Us*: The Holy Spirit

I prepared these booklets in advance and selected a particular focus verse for each day. Each week's booklet also included art to help facilitate creative reflection; additional space was provided to write personal thoughts and prayers. Finally, each weekly booklet included the four components of *lectio divina* as way of reminder: read, meditate, pray, and contemplate. Participants were invited to make these booklets "their own"; I would not be collecting, viewing, or using them for research in any way.

As part of learning to use *lectio divina* as a means of prayer, I shared with the participants these simple steps to help facilitate their daily readings:

- Find a quiet, non-distracting "prayer closet" to spend time with the Lord each morning (reserve at least 20 minutes)
- Begin with a short time of silence asking God to meet you in your time of prayer
- *Optional*: Read the provided "background" Scripture as context (helpful to understand the focus verse)[10]

10. The daily Scripture readings consisted of one or two verses of Scripture – however, I also included a much larger Scripture passage reference for greater context and understanding.

- Slowly read the focus verse once. Re-read it, focusing on any words, phrases, images that capture your attention—pause on those words or phrases.
    - What does this Scripture reveal about God?
    - What does this Scripture reveal about ME?
- Pray (including journaling, drawing, or anything else in the blank provided), particularly based on the words & phrases that stood out to you
- Optional: Hide God's Word in your heart (memorize it!)—the truth of this verse will be working in you and on you all day and night

Introductory kick-off retreat[11]

Twenty-six people from our congregation attended the initial 90-minute prayer retreat on Saturday, February 24, 2018. The session consisted of a didactic introduction to *lectio divina,* an invitation to begin practicing *lectio divina* individually and as a group, and a look ahead at the 40-day journey of prayer. We met in a small chapel with chairs arranged in a semi-circle facing front.

I also provided a blank sheet of paper to each participant to write a personal letter to God. Participants were invited to write about their hopes and fears – anything on their heart and mind – to God, and then seal the envelope. I offered to hold these envelopes in safe keeping until the final retreat.

This retreat session proved exciting and fulfilling for many of the participants because it introduced a style of prayer many of them had been longing for – a deeper, more reflective means of communication and communion with God. It also was a style of prayer that was accessible and understandable to most participants. In addition, the weekly prayer journals

11. See Appendix E for introductory retreat.

allowed participants to reflect on Scripture on a daily basis and journal their thoughts, questions, and prayers to God.

Weekly plenary sessions to teach, model, and practice lectio divina[12]

Following the initial 90-minute retreat, we met together as a group every subsequent Wednesday afternoon during Lent for 45-60 minutes for teaching and practicing *lectio divina*. Specifics varied from week to week but generally included gathering in silence; a short greeting, Scripture, and prayer; a time of teaching and presentation on a particular aspect of *lectio divina*; and an opportunity to practice prayer – sometimes individually in the context of the large group and sometimes interactively in a small group (4-7 people). The following week's prayer booklets were also distributed at each of these meetings.

Approximately the same 18-20 people consistently attended each week in addition to a rotating number of others (five to seven people) from the congregation bringing the weekly average to around 25. One or two people joined the journey mid-stream while a few others dropped out. As the sessions continued, I began appointing facilitators to lead small groups of 4-7 people in practicing *lectio divina* for the final 10-15 minutes of each gathering. Some of this rationale came from my experience with group spiritual direction and its attendant blessings of hearing other perspectives and the comforting realization of common humanity and experience.[13]

Closing retreat[14]

This included a brief time of recapping all we had learned together followed by large and small group prayer time and group discussions, including asking, "what comes next?"

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12. See Appendix B for weekly session outlines.

13. I will share more detail in chapter 5 of the continuing prayer group that resulted from this project – this "group" time of *lectio divina* is one of the core components of this current gathering.

14. See Appendix F for closing retreat outline.

Participants were given an extended time for individual prayer at the end; I also passed back their "Letters to God" that they had written at the first retreat. Participants were also given a survey that remeasured the same key elements of each prayer life after the 40-day prayer journey.

Project Participants[15]

Around 35 people total attended some or all of the prayer journey. Of those, 19 filled out the Informed Consent document and both the pre-course and post-course "Spiritual Life Inventory Questionnaire." Only those 19 participants were included in the statistical research analysis portion of this project.[16] However, nearly 15 additional people participated in some portion of the journey and I will incorporate some of their comments and experiences to inform my subsequent discussion and recommendations.

Participants ranged from late-20's to late 70's. Of the 19 who completed all the necessary research components, the group consisted of six men and thirteen women. Nine participated without a spouse (they were either unmarried; their spouse chose not to attend; or, in two cases, the participant's spouse did attend, but did not complete the project forms); the remaining ten attended with their spouse. In one case, there was a family unit of three people who participated– husband, wife, and grown adult daughter (an additional family unit attended, but the husband did not complete the project forms).

Beyond the 19 who participated fully, three participants dropped out after the first retreat, another two dropped out mid-way through the journey, while others joined or attended sporadically along the way. As stated, none of those participants are included in the research portion of this project.

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15. See Appendix G for full list of participants.

16. The other 15-18 participants had various reasons for not completely the journey or the study. That will be included in the chapter 4 conclusions discussion.

There was significant variance among length of time attending Olivet –several had attended 2-3 years. Several more had been members for 4-7 years, while three participants had been members more than 10 years.

Additionally, there was variance in length of time as a Christian. The vast majority of participants indicated a personal relationship of over 25 years. A few, however, reported less than five years of following Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Health Survey Results[17]

Nineteen participants filled out both the pre-course and post-course surveys (consisting of 16 identical questions); these responses formed the raw data for my research.[18] As noted earlier, there was great diversity among the 19 full participants of the research project. The 16 questions measured diverse indicators such as strength of faith, spiritual motivation, struggles with faith, perceptions of God, and desire to grow in prayer.

Respondents also had opportunity to fill in additional comments and information which helped provide valuable contextual background information and insight. These comments were not used in computing the standard deviation results, but occasionally assisted in interpreting the data. This was especially helpful when a participant's raw scores varied considerably from the group's average and required deeper interpretation. Was *lectio divina* simply not a personally valuable prayer tool for certain people? Or, did certain life events overwhelm the effect of *lectio divina* on a participant's spiritual wellbeing?

17. See Appendix H for spiritual health survey results.

18. While I was satisfied with having 19 participants qualify for the project, I was disappointed that several other participants were actively involved and engaged for most of the journey, but simply did not complete one or more of the required documents to be eligible for the research portion. Their experience with *lectio divina* was no less profound than the other participants; I only wish I could have included them in the statistical analysis.

Analysis was performed with a Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test, including measuring standard deviation using SPSS statistical analysis software. This test analysis functions as the non-parametric equivalent of the paired-samples t-test. Certain test questions were phrased in the negative (e.g., "My prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now," "God feels distant to me," "Prayer seems more frustrating than satisfying."). For the purpose of comparative processing, those negative scores were given a "reversed" numerical score to indicate a value comparable to questions with a "positive" slant (hence, higher numbers represent a positive response, lower numbers indicate a negative response).

All 16 survey questions measured varying degrees of change among the participants and helped provide useful raw data with which to assess and observe trends. However, seven questions revealed a resulting statistical "true change" in the project's participants. This indicated significant change/growth between pre-course and post-course surveys, regardless of other extenuating life circumstances. Results from these seven questions held greater significance in my research analysis and are indicated during analysis. Other relevant findings and questions will also be analyzed and emphasized as appropriate.

The overall trend between pre- and post- surveys showed significant change and growth for the participants. Following the 40 days of prayer using *lectio divina,* respondents reported greater positives in nearly every category of prayer and relationship with God.

Question #1: "I want to grow in my prayer life," —This was an important initial question in order to gauge participants' desire. Motivation to grow in prayer would seem to be a helpful posture from which to grow. Indeed, pre-course responses were almost universally positive: the majority of respondents indicated high enthusiasm as they began the prayer journey. The post-course survey marked slightly higher growth among participants in motivation and

desire to pray, a 7.4% increase (p = 0.109964366). Notably, 16 of the 19 participants marked the highest score possible on the post-course questionnaire. *Analysis*: Most of the participants entered the prayer journey with an enthusiasm to grow in their prayer lives. This motivation, in fact, was the primary consideration for inviting these particular participants. The 40 days of "Praying the Scriptures" seemed to whet most participants' appetite to grow even more in prayer. We learn to pray by praying.

Question #2, "My prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now." The majority of respondents agreed pre-course that their prayer life felt in a rut; few participants disagreed. Post-course responses were dramatically different with the majority disagreeing with the statement—a 12.6% statistical change (p= 0.003859539). *Analysis:* Olivet Lutheran is a church known for its strong prayer ministry and offering multiple ministry options to grow in prayer. Yet even with high motivations to grow in prayer (question #1), many participants felt stuck in a rut. However, participating in this 40-day prayer journey bolstered the participant's prayer life. By the end of the journey, all but two indicated that their prayer life was no longer in a rut.

Question #3, "God feels distant to me." Pre-course survey revealed a range of responses, but trending toward neutral or mild disagreement that God felt distant. Participants, however, reported a significant shift on their post-course survey. By the conclusion of 40 days, the vast majority did not agree that God felt distant. This marked a 10.5% change (p=0.028624074). *Analysis:* this result suggested a strong correlation between praying the Scriptures and reducing their perceived distance between God. The corollary would also seem to be true: *lectio divina* helps people feel closer to God.

Question #4, "Prayer seems more frustrating than satisfying"– this question revealed substantial 11.6% change (p=0.00747966) between the two surveys. The pre-course survey

showed a significant range of responses to this question, with some indicating agreement, others disagreement, and nearly half reporting a neutral response. Prayer, at the outset of the journey, was frustrating for some, satisfying for some, and neutral for some. A significant shift occurred, however, following the 40 days, with all but one reporting positive movement away from "frustrating." *Analysis:* There are nearly countless reasons people might experience prayer as "frustrating" but I believe *lectio divina* addresses many of those frustrations– it is based in the living Word of God which transforms our hearts; it allows people to be authentic and honest in prayer; and it introduces an element of intimacy with God that other forms of prayer can miss. The 40 Days of Prayer journey also introduced a communal aspect which likely improved motivation and morale in prayer.

Question #5, "When I pray, I get distracted easily." This question represented the greatest statistical variation among respondents from beginning to end, a 15.7% improvement ($p=0.000794488$). The answers showed significant range in both pre-course and post-course questionnaires. The beginning survey, however, tilted strongly towards a tendency toward distraction. The post-course survey revealed a noticeable trend away from distraction in prayer. The experience of 40 days of prayer substantially reduced distractions among participants. *Analysis:* Distractions in prayer are part of the Christian pilgrimage. As part of the didactic sessions, participants were encouraged to offer up those distractions as part of prayer and also to receive grace. Because *lectio divina* is such an authentic, honest form of prayer, distractions can actually become springboards to greater authenticity and intimacy.

Questions #6, "Waiting for God to answer my prayers is difficult." Pre-course surveys revealed a trend toward impatience in prayer for most participants. The majority were either neutral (7) or agreed somewhat (7) that waiting for answers to prayer is difficult. Only

participant #2 fully disagreed. The post-course survey, however, revealed a 14.7% (p=0.002915788) toward greater patience and tolerance toward waiting. *Analysis:* At its best, *lectio divina* offers an "answer" to our prayers that is far more fulfilling than material answers: intimacy and relationship with God. Similar to the parable of the man who sells everything he once held dear in order to buy the field with the buried treasure, *lectio divina* is powerful at revealing at heart's true desire—God Himself. That, in turn, makes waiting for other answers to prayer more palatable.[19]

Question #7, "I feel unconditionally loved by God." This question marked a 9.5% upward change (p=0.143147859) among participants, a noticeable shift from the beginning of 40 days to the end. *Analysis*: Something about prayer, especially authentic, honest prayer like *lectio divina* helps people to recognize how deeply they are loved. *Lectio divina* can be effective in releasing from striving in prayer and simply helps us accept and believe God's deep love for each of us. It's coming home to the embrace of God.

Question #8, "It's difficult for me to ask God for anything." This question marked a unique reverse among responses, with participants reporting it 6.3% (p=0.31579) more difficult to ask God for anything at the end of the prayer journey. One participant commented, "Waiting for those answers from 'long time' prayers and trusting God in His perfect timing is the biggest hurdle for me right now.[20] *Analysis:* Participants' comments (written and verbal) did not adequately address this change. Because this negative change was unique among the 16 questions, there is some speculation whether some respondents were uncertain about the wording

19. I want to guard against simplistic analysis – some participants, for example, were going through family distress and upheaval and the survey scores reflected that. This analysis could appear cliched when they are desperately (and impatiently) awaiting an answer to a family member's critical need.

20. Participant #10.

of the question. Participant #5, for example, changed from the highest to lowest response possible, a scoring result completely at odds from their other responses.

Question #9, "God feels close to me during this season of my life." This question revealed a 9.5% change (p=0.034879991) among the participants. While a plurality of respondents agreed with this statement pre-course, there was a noticeable shift, both in the number of participants and the intensity with which they measured God feeling closer in their lives. *Analysis:* This connects to one of the overarching themes of this thesis – God's desire that "I would be their God and they would be my people" and our longing to return to the relational intimacy of Eden.

Question #10, "I sometime feel 'stuck' in my spiritual life." This question measured inertia in participants' prayer lives. Respondents were extremely variable in their initial responses, but in totality reported at 10.5% improvement (p=0.526316) over the 40 days and, as a group, normalized significantly at the end. *Analysis:* The act of consistently praying, coupled with the group accountability and provided resources, appeared to help participants gain momentum in their prayer lives.

Question #11, "I feel like a beginner at prayer." In assessing their perception of their prayer life, respondents averaged close to a 3 on the pre-course questionnaire (including significant variance among respondents). The post-course questionnaire measured 9.5% growth (p=0.473684), with 14 of 19 participants (up from 9 out of 19) indicating that question no longer described their prayer life. Interesting, there was very little correlation between respondents' answers and length of time following Jesus Christ. Of the four participants who responded the lowest, only one (participant 17) had been following Christ for less than 5 years; the other three

reported following Christ for over 30 years. *Analysis:* the act of praying helped many of the participants feel less like a beginner at prayer.

Question #12, "I am experiencing a dark night of the soul right now." This question revealed a significant 13.7% statistical change (p=0.01492618) in participants between the beginning and end of the prayer journey. A few indicated agreement or gave neutral responses pre-course. Post-course, all disagreed with the statement. *Analysis:* while "dark night of the soul" can be interpreted in more than one way, I believe most people regard the description as a lonely, confusing, and heavy season in which God seems distant or absent. My pastoral opinion is that the pre-course results of these 19 participants probably were an accurate representation of the whole church body. 40 days of *lectio divina* prayer brought significant change.

Question #13, "I trust God completely." This question measured overall faith and trust in God. Most responses were high both pre-course and post-course, with a modest 8.4% increase (p=0.421053) over the 40 days. One participant[21] wrote in their comments "developing deeper trust" and measured a stronger response following the 40 Days of prayer.

Question #14, "My highest desire is intimacy with God." One of this thesis' descriptions of prayer is "intimacy with God." Participant answers for this question were almost uniformly high both pre-course and post-course, with the four respondents who marked "neutral" (3) pre-course rising the most. One participant, however, fell two full points. Overall, this question revealed almost no statistical change with only a 1.1% improvement (p=0.052632). *Analysis:* this question spoke more to the participants' consistent level of desire for spiritual intimacy with God rather than *lectio divina*'s role in increasing spiritual desire. A resultant question: because the majority of the spiritual growth came from those who were not initially desiring intimacy,

21. Participant #03.

what would be the result of 40 days of *lectio divina* prayer among people who initially ranked even lower?

Question #15, "I am fearful of God." While this question resulted in only 8.4% statistical change (p=0.421053). It also produced the greatest range of answers among participants. Two participants agreed pre-course that this question describes them "all the time." The theme of "loss" seemed a common theme among those experiencing fear. Participant #07 wrote, "My daughter's brain tumor" as a prevailing reason. Participant #04 wrote, "many losses in my life." Notably, neither participant's score changed pre-course to post-course. Participant 03, on the other hand, dramatically improved (from a "2" to a "5") during the 40 days. Reflecting on his struggles with addiction at the beginning, he writes at the end, "developing deeper trust."

Question #16, "I desire to follow God no matter where He leads." This final question served as a good measurement of the participants' level of committed faith, with a 5.4% increase (p=0.20482425). Pre-course surveys revealed 14 with a positive response and 5 with a neutral or negative response. Following the prayer journey, all responded positively.

Trends

There were some notable trends resulting from these survey results. The evidence clearly indicates that after going through a 40-day course on *lectio divina* prayer, people reported that their prayer life was no longer in a rut, felt more satisfaction with their prayer life, felt they were better able to focus during prayer, and had more patience in waiting for God to answer their prayers. Additionally, after the prayer journey, people reported feeling closer to God and were less likely to report experiencing a dark night of the soul.

Even responses with no statistical meaningful change helped reveal participants' desire for intimacy in prayer. Question #14, for example, stated, "my highest desire is intimacy with

God." Although the data indicates that there was no statistical change, a closer look at the data reveals that the vast majority of participants rated themselves high in this area pre-course (average score of >4.5). This speaks to the strong level of faith and longing for God among the participants even prior to the 40 day of prayer.

Many of the participants also commented about family members in the context of prayer. One participant commented, "I was blessed by being born into a family that believed in God – worshiped every Sunday and taught me to be loving and kind."[22] This participant also leads other prayer groups at our church. Most of the others, however, spoke of pain and the longing for God to deliver family members: "medical problems in family members,"[23] "my marriage,"[24] "renewing a relationship with my son is a work in process,"[25] among many other responses. These comments revealed a depth of honesty and also pain to be brought to God in prayer.

A final observation – that those few participants who have been following Jesus the shortest amount of time had the greatest range of answers both pre- and post-course. Their change rates closely mirrored the other participants, but they appeared to experience the "extremes" of prayer more acutely than those who had been following Jesus most of their lives. Their relative lack of experience in prayer possibly made them more subject to the inevitable peaks and valleys encountered in prayer. On the other hand, the majority of participants had been believers for many years. A number of results (especially those questions that revealed little statistical change) perhaps reflected the respondents' more mature faith and approach to prayer.

22. Participant #06.

23. Participant #15.

24. Participant #07.

25. Participant #09.

Conclusion

My hypothesis for this project was: "Believers who desire to grow spiritually and are willing to regularly engage in the spiritual discipline of *lectio divina* (praying the Scriptures) can achieve spiritual growth that is measurable and observable. Therefore, teaching and equipping members of Olivet Lutheran Church in *lectio divina* will help promote spiritual growth." I believe the project evidence confirms this hypothesis.

There were seven survey questions that revealed true statistical change in the participants' view of and approach to prayer. Intriguingly, six of these seven questions specifically measured struggles with prayer or difficulties in the participants' lives: "My prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now," "God feels distant to me," "Prayer seems more frustrating than satisfying," "When I pray, I get distracted easily," "Waiting for God to answer my prayers is difficult," and "I am experiencing a dark night of the soul right now." A few observations:

- Affirming challenges and struggles with prayer requires courage to answer candidly, and notably, people's honest responses to these struggles came at the beginning of the course, before deeper relational trust could be developed. People either believed this was a safe place to be authentic, or they simply chose to be courageous and honest, regardless of risk.
- These results correspond with my earlier assessment of the ministry and culture of Olivet – that even though we are a church that prioritizes prayer, many people struggle in this area and are willing to admit that.
- Most encouragingly, many of the participants' struggles with prayer were significantly addressed by the 40 days of *lectio divina*. Challenges and doubts became areas of confidence and intimacy with God. The final question that revealed true

change (and the only "positively-framed" one) bolsters this assessment: "God feels close to me during this season of my life." The conclusion: praying the Scriptures with *lectio divina*, individually and communally, helps draw people back to their original purpose: to walk daily in intimacy with their Creator God.

Individual Cases of Note

Individual participants did not always trend uniformly with the whole group. Every person brought their own stylistic preferences, life circumstances, and temperament to this journey. In addition, *lectio divina* as a method of prayer is not for all tastes! One older woman, following the first retreat, informed me after the session that she was quitting – "this is all too complicated for me, I'm afraid," she said. I was initially taken aback, but I later assessed the retreat presentation and understood her point – I had put a lot of information in the first retreat and did not balance well between didactics and opportunities to practice and experience *lectio divina*. For someone in their 80's who had never prayed in this way before, learning *lectio divina* proved a steep learning curve.

Participant #07 broke from the overall trends of the other participants and actually declined in certain key categories from the beginning of the journey to the end. Most obvious were a decline on the questions "My highest desire is intimacy with God" and "I desire to follow God no matter where He leads." Why would 40 days of *lectio* prayer cause a decline in those areas for someone? Some context was given in the comment section where this participant stated that there were very difficult family circumstances to navigate during the 40-day journey. This perhaps mitigated perceived trust and intimacy with God that overwhelmed any positive effect of *lectio divina*.

Participant #03 was another participant with initially confusing scores. This participant marked the first question, "I want to grow in my prayer life" with a low score ("Does not describe me much of the time"). Interestingly, on the next question, "my prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now," this individual indicated this "does describe me much of the time." This suggested an honest self-assessment combined with a confusing lack of motivation to improve: why take a prayer course with little motivation to grow in prayer? The written comments were helpful in bringing clarity: the participant was going through a time of depression – prayer was a lifeline, but there was little internal motivation to grow.

Looking Ahead

In chapter 5, I will further analyze the results of this study. I also will explore potential ministries resulting from the findings: could be a group like this be lay-led instead of clergy-led? Could this journey of *lectio divina* prayer be modified for staff? For youth? For church leaders? On a broader scale, is there a role for *lectio divina* in the 21st century evangelical church going forward? I will also report on the immediate aftermath of the 40 days of prayer journey. Did any further ministry actually result from this experience?

In addition, prompted by some of the participants' comments and struggles with *lectio divina,* I will examine other forms of *lectio divina* that employ visual, auditory, and other sensory methods. What about *lectio divina* for the person who can't sit still? Or the person who doesn't like silence? Finally, I will conclude with some reflections and recommendations for the church at large. How will God continue to use *lectio divina* to accomplish His heart's desire – that "I shall be their God and they shall be my people"?

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The problem revisited

We are created for intimacy with God – to know Him and be known. That intimacy is at once our deepest longing and our greatest struggle. The root problem hindering us (and often obscuring our longing) is sin. It infiltrated the perfect Garden of Eden, breaking the relationship between the Creator and His children, and it has dominated our existence ever since.

God, however, has not abandoned us nor left us to our own devices. His heart's desire from creation has been relationship with His children – that He would be our God and we would be His people. Sin fractured that holy relationship but could not quench the Father's love. God, out of His steadfast and pursuing, has continued to initiate relationship and reconciliation, ultimately stepping into His own creation to redeem us. As the author of Hebrews puts it, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son."[1]

Now, we are living in the "now" and the "not yet," the long, messy detour between the Garden of Eden and our eternal heavenly Eden.[2] The reality of this fallen world and our sin naturally draws our affections away from God. But God has invited us to enter into a life of relationship and intimacy with Him. We simply must choose it.

Today's contemporary church reveals the tension in our own hearts as we are alternately drawn and repulsed by our longing for intimacy with God. The restless longing of our souls

1. Hebrews 1:1.

2. Revelation 22:1-2.

confirms that we are spiritually hungry and thirsty for the living God; we know only He can truly satisfy us. Yet the priorities of our modern churches often betray our allegiance to exterior values instead– we want charismatic preachers, dynamic leaders, bigger and better ministries, and awe-inspiring facilities. The words of the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah reveal that this is not a new tension for the people of God: "Thus says the LORD: 'Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.' But they said, '*We will not walk in it*.'"[3]

The contemplative monastic author Thomas Merton did not approve of our modern propensity toward frantic busyness, business world styles of marketing, and constant activity. He was fearful that believers would come to equate all that sound and fury with actual spiritual growth. His prophetic words, in fact, could easily have been written about many believers today:

> Interior solitude is impossible for them. They fear it. They do everything they can to escape it. What is worse, they try to draw everyone else into activities as senseless and as devouring as their own… They are great promoters of useless work. They love to organize meetings and banquets and conferences and lectures. They print flyers, write letters, talk for hours on the telephone in order that they may gather a hundred people together in a large room where they will all fill the air with smoke and make a great deal of noise and roar at one another and clap their hands and stagger home at last patting one another on the back with the assurance that they have all done great things to spread the Kingdom of God.[4]

Eugene Peterson has a similar prophetic word of warning to those in ministry, especially when we simultaneously become "better" at our work and ministry while becoming "worse" at

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3. Jeremiah 6:16, italics added.

4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation,* (New Directions; Reprint edition, 2007), 83.

recognizing our desperate dependence on God. He writes, "along the way, the primacy of God and his work in our lives gives way ever so slightly to the primacy of *our* work in God's Kingdom, and we begin thinking of ways that we can use God in what we are doing…"[5] Peterson also identifies how the desire for self-fulfillment that permeates our culture also infects the souls of our churches: "our tastes, inclinations, and appetites are consulted endlessly… the options proliferate… I train myself to think big because I am big, important, significant."[6]

I would argue that for all evangelicalism's "successes," we are actually experiencing a famine of intimacy with God. The illusion we desperately cling on to is that we are masters of our own domain, including our own hearts. Somehow, our frantic level of activity proves the genuineness of our faith – and is evidence that surely we are being transformed. The prophet Elijah had experienced the glory and power of the Lord on top of Mt. Carmel. What a faith builder! Or was it? Mere hours later, he had plunged into a dark pit where he was despairing of his life. Praying that he might die by the side of the road, Elijah instead experienced God's care and grace in an unfamiliar way – heavenly sustenance and a renewal of his prophetic calling. Then, on top of Mt Horeb, Elijah witnessed three massive displays of power remarkably similar to Mt Carmel. Yet this time, Elijah had spiritual eyes to discern: the Lord was *not* in the howling wind; He was *not* in the powerful earthquake; He was *not* in the raging fire. Instead, God reveals himself to Elijah in "the sound of a low whisper."[7]

Lectio divina in its purest form rejects much of the consumerist approach of contemporary ministry, where we seek to dictate terms to God in our approach to prayer and

5. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, (Eerdmans, 2008), 124.

6. Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book*, (Eerdmans, 2009), 32.

7. 1 Kings 19:12.

Scripture, in exchange for a posture of deep surrender to God. He speaks to us not in the frenzy of external activity and stimulus, but in the still, small voice of love. It's a countercultural pathway, but there is something inherently freeing about giving authority over our lives, our thoughts, our emotions, our past, present, and future to God. *Lectio divina* invites us to approach the throne of grace in a posture of submission and open hands, allowing God to be God. And in that posture, we discover true freedom and joy, for God meets us as holistic beings – mind, body, emotions, and soul.

The American church stands at the same crossroads as the people of Jeremiah's day – choosing either to continue striving after monuments and ministries that testify to our own prowess or to return to the ancient paths of blessing. I believe *lectio divina* is an invitation and opportunity to return to this blessed path.

"Praying the Scriptures" Project Recap

Starting assumptions

This project began with several assumptions about spiritual growth in believers:

- *The Word of God is an important tool for spiritual growth*. One popular evangelical website declares, "It cannot be emphasized strongly enough just how important the Bible is to our lives."[8] This assumption also finds strong support from God's Word itself: Paul encourages young pastor Timothy, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."[9] The presupposition is that God's Word must actually be read to be effective.

8. Got Questions, "Why Should We Read/Study the Bible?" https://www.gotquestions.org/why-read-Bible.html, (Got Questions Ministries, 2002-2019), Accessed June 24, 2019.

9. 2 Timothy 3:16.

- *Most Christians want to grow in their prayer life.* The heartfelt request of the disciples mirrors our own: "Lord, teach us to pray."[10] Most believers understand the importance of prayer and want to grow.
- *Prayer is a struggle.* God reminded that people through Isaiah, "my ways are not your ways, nor my thoughts your thoughts."[11] One evangelical website for college students attempts to describe why prayer is so hard: "it's strange, it's a discipline, it's misunderstood."[12] The foreignness of prayer to our modern sensibilities makes it a mystery. Many believers, unfortunately, simply give up.
- *Lectio divina* can be an effective tool for spiritual growth, hence my project hypothesis: *Believers who desire to grow spiritually and are willing to regularly engage in the spiritual discipline of lectio divina (praying the Scriptures) can achieve spiritual growth that is measurable and observable. Therefore, teaching and equipping members of Olivet Lutheran Church in lectio divina will help promote spiritual growth*.

The "Praying the Scriptures" project occurred at Olivet "Beacon of Light" Lutheran Church where I serve as Pastor of Discipleship. As described in chapter 4, Olivet's ministry personality is largely extroverted and activity-based. Even with multiple options to grow together in prayer (prayer gatherings, worship services, one-on-one prayer with deacons and pastors), there is a hunger among many of our congregants to grow spiritually — to go deeper in

10. Luke 11:1.

11. Isaiah 55:8-9.

12. Tim Downs, *Why is Prayer so Hard?*, https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/prayer/why-is-prayer-so-hard.html, 2007 Cru Press, Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., accessed June 24, 2019.

prayer, to know God and to be known by God. This was certainly the case among our project's participants. Pre-project surveys clearly indicated a nearly-universal desire among participants to grow in prayer, and also a willingness to experience this largely unfamiliar style of prayer called *lectio divina*.

I believe this project's participants represented an accurate cross-section of Olivet and, indeed, of the American evangelical church. Believers are longing to experience meaningful prayer and connection to God. They are frustrated with their lack of connection to God and often don't know any other ways to pray. The styles of prayer being modeled in the evangelical church do not always address people's greatest hunger and longing for intimacy with God.

This prayer journey using *lectio divina* as a means of prayer sought to address those longings. There were weekly plenary sessions for teaching, answering questions, and practicing *lectio divina*; our gatherings also gave time and space for authentic small group interaction and prayer; finally, it invited participants to engage in this prayer practice daily. Providing participants with a "ready-made" prayer journal each week allowed us all to experience the same Bible passages and to engage consistent themes as a group.

Project highlights

The 19 participants who met all the requirements of the project (attended the majority of sessions, submitted the IRC, and took both pre-course and post-course surveys) confirmed the hypothesis. Participants indicated feeling closer to God after the prayer journey and, notably, also indicated less antipathy towards God and prayer by the end. Attendance remained generally consistent from beginning to end, with additional people joining in weeks two and three. Some demographic highlights among the participants: five brand new members at Olivet, a newly-married couple, and one woman who did not otherwise attend the church. Enthusiasm for the

prayer journals likewise remained high, with participants commenting on the value of spending time with God in Scripture.

At the final session, there was open discussion about continuing "Praying the Scriptures" gathering in some capacity. Two participants agreed to facilitate an ongoing version of the group. A year later, the group continues to be lay-led (with no pastoral involvement) with an average attendance of 8-10 people.

Project limitations

While these results are encouraging, there were certain questions and limitations inherent to the project. Although *lectio divina* was the primary spiritual tool for this project, other prayer variables were present as well. Elements of the prayer journey included gathering regularly in large and small groups, prioritizing individual daily prayer, working through common Scripture passages, and receiving guidance and encouragement from a spiritual mentor. Each of these prayer practices could be potential instruments for spiritual growth on their own. Could any of those (or certain combinations) also promote true change in participants apart from *lectio divina*?

Other factors to consider: was the format of the study the best means to introduce *lectio divina* to participants? Was the devotional guide's minimalist approach (predominantly Scripture with little devotional commentary and questions) most helpful? Did the participants continue to use *lectio divina* in their prayer life beyond the 40 days and, if so, did they continue to experience personal growth and transformation through this style of prayer? Some partial answers can be inferred by the data and the generally enthusiastic response to the format.

Additional limitations to the study included:

- **Invitation-based**– logistically, space was limited, so participated was based on invitation. Would the data have changed if the prayer journey had been open to all?

- **Schedule** — Wednesday afternoon start times were difficult for some people to attend (and also made for a long stretch at church including Lenten dinner and worship service). For a gathering of busy people, any established time would naturally exclude some people.
- **Busyness** - One young mother indicated a struggle with finding time in her schedule to attend. After the second session, she told me, "this is exactly what I need, but I have so much trouble carving out time." She only returned for one other session. This was painfully ironic because "redeeming time" is so central to *lectio divina.*
- **Not a good fit for certain personalities –** our group was a melting pot of personalities, backgrounds, and spiritual approaches. For some, this prayer experience represented a blessed "homecoming." At the other extreme, a few people experienced confusion, frustration, and uncertainty. Is it because *lectio divina* is so different from people's experience of prayer, or is the prayer practice simply not effective for some people's particular personalities? *Note:* this will be discussed further in the alternative forms of *lectio divina* portion.
- **Theological concerns** – while this was not an issue for our group, research cited in chapter 3 indicated discomfort in some circles about *lectio divina'*s theological underpinnings. Some believe it is too "subjective" while there are certain evangelicals who continue to harbor doubt about "Catholic" prayer practices. Even the Latin phrase *lectio divina* could be a barrier for some.
- **People unaware of its existence –** this project group demonstrated that few people had experienced or even heard of *lectio divina* before this prayer journey.

Project areas of improvement

In assessing the project, areas of improvement would include:

- **Improve measurement tools –** making the surveys completely anonymous (with use of a numbering system) could improve participation and transparency of responses. Although though I was gratified by the honesty of responses, participants knew their pastor would be reading their answers which possibly affected their choice of words.
- **Establish a more consistent system for evaluating responses** – this could help clarify certain question's intent; the numbering score system was confusing for some participants, particularly for questions that measured negative responses.
- **Better define survey terms** – what does "fear of the Lord," "dark night of the soul," or "spiritual maturity" mean? Do the participants and I have the same understanding of these terms?
- **Follow-up survey after 40 days** – this measurement would have provided greater perspective on the longevity of changes: how were people doing apart from the warmth and accountability of community? How many were still praying using *lectio divina*?
- **Emphasize greater prayer experience within the 40 days -** While I tried hard not to overwhelm the participants with too much didactic information, I realize that occurred at times, especially in the early sessions. In my eagerness to lay a strong foundation and share the essentials of *lectio divina*, early class time often resembled a college lecture rather than an invitation to pray together. A stronger emphasis on experiential prayer while shifting more of educational resources for participants to take home would have helped the balance.

Discussion

Given the survey results from this project, I would affirm that *lectio divina* is a legitimate means to achieve spiritual growth for believers in the church, especially when pursued in the nurture, support, and accountability of other believers. Stephen Macchia writes that a healthy believer "learns and grows in community…, involved in spiritual and relational growth in the context of like-minded believers."[13] This project revealed the blessings of walking the journey of prayer together.

Given this research project's apparent success in helping participants grow spiritually in prayer, how can we expand this means of prayer for the potential blessing of the whole church? Can *lectio divina* be integrated into other areas of the church's ministry?

It is heartening to know that *lectio divina* has become a far more mainstream means of prayer and spiritual growth in the contemporary church. A number of denominations and movements have embraced *lectio divina* as a style of prayer, including United Methodists[14], Vineyard[15], the Jesuits[16], the Reformed Church of America[17], and the Lutheran church.[18] While

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13. Stephen Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, (Baker Books, 2007), 18.

14. Daniel McLain Hixon, "Lectio Divina" (United Methodist Resources. http://danielhixon.blogspot.com/2012/10/lectio-divina.html October 2012), accessed June 28, 2019.

15. Julie Cameron, "Lectio Divina - A longer explanation" (Leeds Vineyard, https://www.leedsvineyard.org/Articles/457771/Leeds_Vineyard/Resources/Teaching_Series/Prayer_and_Fasting/Lectio_Divina.aspx, 2015), accessed June 28, 2019.

16. Daniel Harington, "Lectio Divina: Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions" (America, the Jesuit Review, https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/428/article/lectio-divina, March 2003), accessed June 28, 2019.

17. Reformed Church in America, "Lectio Divina (Spiritual Reading)", Reformed Church in America, https://www.rca.org/lectio-divina, 2008), accessed June 28, 2019.

18. Michael Scherer, "Lectio Divina: A way to slow down and listen to God -- Ancient discipline also practiced by Lutherans," https://metrolutheran.org/2013/07/lectio-divina-a-way-to-slow-down-and-listen-to-god/, Metro Lutheran, July 2013), accessed June 29, 2019.

there continues to be some debate about the theological basis for *lectio divina* among some individuals and denominations,[19] this is usually concerning its abuses, not its basic teaching.

There are also encouraging numbers of resources, ministries, and parachurch organizations that are actively promoting spiritual formation for believers and churches, including *lectio divina:*

- The "Solo" Bible is a wonderful spiritual devotional that invites the reader into meditating on the Word of God with help from the text and some guided questions and suggestions. This is *lectio divina* geared for the contemporary church.
- *Renovare* is an ecumenical Christian movement "that models, resources, and advocates fullness of life with God experienced, by grace, through the spiritual practices of Jesus and of the historical Church."[20] Its website and gatherings feature a great deal of teaching about the spiritual disciplines, including *lectio divina*.
- Additional active contemporary parachurch organizations (e.g., Leadership Transformation Inc. and the Transforming Center) whose purpose is inviting the American church into deeper, more sustainable forms of ministry. Equipping believers using spiritual formation tools, including *lectio divina*, are part of these groups' ministry mandate.
- The "Pray as You Go" app – a daily devotional based in Ignatian spirituality. The app's stated purpose: to help people "become more aware of God's presence in your life; to listen to and reflect on God's word; to grow in your relationship with God."[21]

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19. Tim Challies, *A Danger of Lectio Divina*, https://www.challies.com/articles/a-danger-of-lectio-divina/ May 21, 2014, accessed June 27, 2019.

20. Renovare, https://renovare.org/about/overview, accessed June 29, 2019.

21. Pray as You Go, https://pray-as-you-go.org, accessed June 26, 2019.

Next Step Recommendations

Positive results from the "Praying the Scriptures" prayer journey at Olivet along with a growing receptivity in the American church to *lectio divina* suggest the Spirit may be inviting believers to engage with this ancient practice. Indeed, *lectio divina* is growing in popularity as a means of prayer by Christians of nearly all ecumenical backgrounds.[22] How is God inviting the church to continue to grow in this blessed form of prayer?

Group settings —The "community" format of this project augmented the power and effect of *lectio divina* for participants, providing mutual support, encouragement and accountability for the 40 days together. That fact that the journey is continuing in an ongoing church small group format speaks to its ongoing relevance and blessing. A "group" form of *lectio divina* could easily be introduced as a devotional exercise in staff meetings, leadership gatherings, or even adapted for congregational prayer in worship services. Praying God's Word in community not only helps safeguard against potential interpretative abuses, it also invites the people of God into shared experience and insight. *Lectio divina*, as this projected demonstrated, also is an accessible form of praying for Christians at all levels of maturity. A modified version of *lectio divina* could be a meaningful style of prayer for children and youth groups also.

One-on-one settings – introducing *lectio divina* could be powerful in pastoral counseling sessions, meeting with wedding couples, or even ministering to a grief-stricken widow or family. The Word of God speaks deeply to the hearts of those who are seeking and hurting. That same prayer practice, first modeled in the church, could be experienced and then applied by individuals in their own devotional life.

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22. Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, "Lectio Divina: Encounter the Living Word in Prayer", http://howto.bible/lectio-divina-encounter-living-word-prayer, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 2019, accessed June 25, 2019.

Personal devotional settings – *lectio divina* introduces a qualitatively different style of prayer and Scripture reading for believers. It stands in contrast to the quantity-over-quality approach to the one-year Bible reading plans and it offers a more reflective and personalized approach than pre-written devotional materials. Helpful to Olivet's research study was the focused daily Scripture reading, along with a space to write, draw, or prayerfully reflect on that particular passage. *Lectio divina* can offer a welcome change of pace to believers who have pursued other devotional styles.

Small groups —this project introduced *lectio divina* to Olivet, but the hunger persisted beyond the 40 days of prayer and has resulted in a growing small group at Olivet. Rather than limiting *lectio divina* only to a single small group, however, can there be cross-pollination between prayer groups? While most of Olivet's other prayer groups are based on intercessory prayer, *lectio divina* could bring new exciting dynamics to this intercessory form of prayer.

Seasonal prayer journey – following the success of last year's prayer journey, I hope to lead one *lectio divina* class every year to the church. The Advent and Lenten seasons are two rich times of the Christian calendar to consider. Continuing iterations of this prayer journey would offer a blend a creative teaching, modeling, and prayer practice, with the goal of creating a spiritual ripple effect of prayer extending beyond these group settings into the entire church.

Other styles of prayer based on lectio divina

Just as there are many ways to practice *lectio divina,*[23] there are also other forms of this style of prayer based on a similar structure. While significant discussion of these other styles goes beyond the scope of this research project, a brief mention is appropriate because they address some concerns experienced by this project's participants.

23. With different Bible translations, in solitude or in a group, isolated Scriptures or working systematically through a whole book – the variations are nearly endless!

- *Audio divina* – this style invites people into prayer through *sound*, whether the spoken word, music, or some other sound (perhaps from nature). For many of us, certain sounds evoke deep emotions, memories, or even inclinations to worship. In order to adhere to the intent of this particular project, believers could practice *audio divina* by listening to Scripture read by another person (whether live or a recording). Indeed, until recent centuries, Scripture was nearly always spoken. For those who struggle to read the printed page for any reason, this would be a meaningful alternative to enter more deeply into "praying the Scriptures."[24]
- *Visio-divina*[25] involves receiving God's word to us through images, art, or pictures. While this prayer practice can be used with almost any visual format, traditional *visio divina* uses Biblical imagery (often art derived from an easily-recognized Scripture passage). Rembrandt's "Prodigal Son," for example, drew Henri Nouwen into a profoundly moving and long-lasting experience of *visio divina*. In Nouwen's case, the painting's impact came largely through reflecting on the Gospel story brought to life by the art.

For the busy single mom who struggles to find a quiet place to pray, for the man who can't seem to sit still, for the person whose eyesight no longer allows them to read, for the nature lover who experiences God in creation, other approaches to prayer can provide participants with many of the same contemplative benefits of *lectio divina*¸ but simply in a different format.

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24. Christianity Today has published a number of articles about *lectio divina*, including one called "A Musical *Lectio Divina*" by Andy Whitman that describes a new musical release by Son Lux that draws the listener into deep reflection and meditation of God - https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/april/32.73.html, April 24, 2008.

25. https://www.upperroom.org/resources/visio-divina has some very helpful questions and recommendations for practicing *visio divina*, accessed July 1, 2019.

Reflection

Project's impact on others

Only a small minority of the participants had previously experienced this sort of prayer before; this was a new prayer experience for the majority. There was a wonderful sense of spiritual energy and discovery at our gatherings, a holy excitement among participants about experiencing God in new and meaningful ways. I was gratified to see participants at weekend worship services talking about the class or carrying their prayer devotional booklets with them. This form of prayer became part of people's lives for these 40 days, and the interaction of community only augmented their experience.

Participants' personal comments

A number of participants shared some meaningful reflections and responses to the journey on their questionnaires. Some of these comments helped give context to their survey responses while other comments simply gave greater insight into their heart. A sampling:

Always on the path to better understanding my relationship with God. Want more time to read and reflect[26]

I am very thankful that I took this prayer group and I learned a lot.[27]

It's been a great journey and I feel freer to not have to memorize Scripture but let it just be in my heart.[28]

Shift from "being a Christian" to "becoming His beloved."[29]

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26. Participant #04, Closing Survey, April 2017.

27. Participant #06, Closing Survey, April 2017.

28. Participant #10, Closing Survey, April 2017.

29. Participant #02, Closing Survey, April 2017.

This study has taught me to pray in a deeper way. I feel much more comfortable talking to God now. I know He listens to all my prayers. He grants them in His way and His time according to His plan.[30]

Other comments from participants spoke of struggle with family, doubt, and sin. One participant wrote simply, "afraid of surrender." My hope—and I believe it was accomplished through the prayer journey—was not only for people to grow spiritually, but also to experience freedom and invitation to come to God exactly as they are, with their burdens, fears, doubts, and complaints. That, too, is part of growing in intimacy with God.

Project's impact on researcher

This project represented my primary passion as a pastor—to help people build intimacy with God. This, of course, is God's heart as well. That made "Praying the Scriptures: *a Lenten Prayer Journey*" a richly satisfying experience for me. I was gratified, first of all, by the number of people who responded to the initial invitation (and more beyond that). It spoke not only to a willingness among participants to try something new, but also a deep hunger to grow closer to God in prayer.

I also was deeply moved by people's honesty. Participants were very open about their struggles and desires. From the very first session, there was an atmosphere of safe belonging, grace, and camaraderie. I also was thankful that the research supported my original hypothesis – that, yes, *lectio divina* is not only a meaningful prayer tool to promote spiritual growth, but more incisively, addresses people's deepest longings for authenticity, connection, and transformation. The statistical analysis bore it out: the efficacy of *lectio divina* in strengthening the participants' prayer lives but also in helping resolve certain struggles and challenges with prayer. Indeed, the

30. Participant #16, Closing Survey, April 2017.

research confirmed that regularly practicing *lectio divina* actually helps people recover some of the relational intimacy with God that has been lost through sin. As I reviewed James Fowler's *Stages of Faith,*[31] I recognized participants beginning to shift towards a "conjunctive" form of faith (or as Scott Peck more simply describes it, *mystical-communal*) through *lectio divina*; participants were learning to enjoy the mystery! Prayer was no longer simply transactional or rational, but deeply relational with a God who is far beyond us but is also loving and incarnational.

In preparation for the project, I had been studying and researching *lectio divina*, but was also taking opportunity to practice it more in my own life. My wife and I began using *lectio divina* as part of our morning devotions; there were many times also when I practiced this style of prayer individually during prayer walks or at work. This gave me passion and enthusiasm for *lectio divina* to share with the prayer journey's participants.

When I ponder our culture – both secular and church – I grieve that there is such resistance to experiencing deeper intimacy with God. I see it also in myself! *Lectio divina*, in that way, functions as a two-edged sword in our lives. On the one hand, it invites us more deeply into relationship with the living God; on the other hand, it exposes our false expectations, the resistance of our own heart to intimacy and transformation.

Individual believers and whole churches are prone to spending so much energy on a desired exterior result or appearance. Unfortunately, as David Benner cautions, "the problem with the false self is that it works. It helps us forget that we are naked. Before long, we are no longer aware of the underlying vulnerability and become comfortable once again."[32] Scripture

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31. http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html, accessed July 2, 2019.

32. David Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself, (*IVP Books, 2015), 82.

affirms this: “man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”[33] The Psalmist reveals this same heart of God, that “you desire truth in the inner parts.”[34] Shepherding our people through this project and continuing to use *lectio divina* in my own devotional time has helped expose my own propensity towards personal image and kingdom-building and refocus my eyes on the true living God.

Final Challenge

God’s heart is for spiritual transformation. Paul writes, “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."[35] God offers us transformation, and “stepping onto the road of Christian spiritual transformation requires an encounter with the living God.”[36] Spiritual transformation, then, represents a return to God’s original plan of intimacy with His beloved children. And God calls on his church to be beacon of invitation and hope to a searching world.

The discipline of *lectio divina* – being with God through His Word – allows Him to do a powerful work within us as and allows His love to change us to our core. Alan Fadling speaks of how this relationship with God, forged in the warmth of being with Him, spills over into our relationships, our finances, even our seasons of doubt and suffering where even the “pace of pain became, for us, the pace of God’s love and grace. We discovered that what we wanted most was to know God was with us.”[37]

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33. 1 Samuel 16:7.

34. Psalm 51:6.

35. Philippians 1:6.

36. Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple: Ten Traits of a Vital Christian* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2004), 73.

37. Alan Fadling, *An Unhurried Life: Following Jesus' Rhythms of Work and Rest* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 126.

Spiritual pilgrims, hungry for God, have discovered this blessed means of prayer called *lectio divina* as a sacred intersection between God's divine initiative and purposes and our own availability[38]—as Bruce Demerest attests, "spiritual growth does not happen automatically."[39] We participate, we agree, we cooperate, we make ourselves available to the Spirit of God's work in our lives. The heart of *lectio divina* is inviting God to do His work in every part of our lives.

Richard Foster in his book, *Streams of Living Water,* notably chooses not to define spirituality so much as to illustrate it through real life example. This is a reminder that genuine spirituality finds its roots in living, breathing people who are in daily relationship with the living God. He writes, "we must recognize that the majority of Jesus' life—and of ours—is found in our families and homes, in our work and play, among our neighbors and in our everyday surroundings."[40]

I believe God is inviting the church to return to this kind of everyday spirituality —not the ethereal mists of the ivory tower, but the granular, complex, earthy stuff of real relationships and complicated lives. Frank Laubach was a modern-day contemplative. Yet even there, the earthy roots are present: "of all today's miracles, the greatest is this: To know that I find Thee best when I work listening, not when I am still or meditative or even on my knees in prayer, but when I work listening and cooperating."[41] This, of course, echoes the ancient Benedictine rule, *ora et labora:* "work and pray."

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38. The Apostle Paul reveals the heart of this tension in his admonishment "to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13-14).

39. Bruce A. Demarest, *Soul Guide: Following Jesus as Spiritual Director,* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2003), 25.

40. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water,* (HarperOne, 2001), 136.

41. Cited in Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water,* (HarperOne, 2001), 44.

Too many churches are based on the "attractional model" of attempting to "persuade" the world to give Jesus a try. The spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina* give us means to respond to the authentic Gospel invitation of Jesus Christ — "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."[42] May the church, the bride of Christ, return to the ancient paths of blessing and relationship, the promise for all who would come: "I shall be their God and they shall be my people."

42. John 7:37.

Appendix A

Invitation to Praying the Scriptures

Initial email invitation (sent January 31, 2018):
This coming Lenten season, I will be leading a prayer group at Olivet called "**Praying the Scriptures**," based on the ancient practice of *lectio divina* (literally "sacred reading"). It involves reading, reflecting, praying, and living out God's Word. This is a group open to all levels of prayer experience.

We'll begin our 40-day prayer journey with a 90-minute time together on a weekend near the beginning of Lent (February 24) and then will meet for 45 minutes each Wednesday evening (5:00 to 5:45) during Lent before Soup & Sandwiches and the worship service. This journey also involves a daily guided prayer time on your own between the Wednesdays. We'll conclude the week after Easter. I think of the wonderful promise from God in Jeremiah 29:13, "**You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart.**"

This prayer group has a limit of 20, so please let me know as soon as possible if you are interested or have questions.

Follow-up email sent out to those who responded to initial email invitation:
Thank you again for being a part of our Lenten prayer group. A few notes to pass along to you as we draw closer:

-Our first meeting will be next **Wednesday, February 21** in the "Journey Room" (the classroom across from Pastor Dave's office). We will continue to meet each Wednesday through March 28 from 5:00 to 5:40 pm. I will be there early each week to make the room hospitable and welcoming.

-We will also have a kick-off prayer "retreat" on **Saturday, February 24** from 9:30 to 11:00 am in the Celebration Chapel. We'll take that Saturday retreat to discern our final prayer retreat date after Easter.

A few more housekeeping items (I will also be sharing this during our first gathering):
-This Lenten prayer journey is based on the ancient prayer practice called *Lectio Divina* (Latin for "sacred reading")—it's almost the opposite of "Read-Through-the-Bible-in-a-Year" plans which focus on QUANTITY; this kind of prayer is about QUALITY and going DEEP into Scripture and allowing the Spirit to get ahold of us at the deepest level. So while I will be teaching at our large group times, our primary purpose even there will be to practice and grow in PRAYER (silently, not spoken).

-As I've mentioned to some of you, this is almost a "pilot" journey—we hope to do this again at Olivet and possibly even offer it to other churches. In fact, inviting people to go deeper in prayer is the "core" of my doctorate program. To that end, if you are willing, I will be inviting you to fill out a "spiritual inventory" at the beginning and the end of this journey to measure growth in prayer and identifying what was most helpful in this journey. As always, this is ALL for God's Kingdom! I look forward to our journey together.

Appendix B

Praying the Scriptures Weekly Lesson Plans

Praying the Scriptures Week #1
February 21, 2018

-**Welcome & Scripture** (Psalm 46)
-**Opening silence** (& *listening)* - 2 minutes

-**Prayer journey quiz** (T/F):

- Prayer is for ALL believers—**TRUE**
- The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness – **TRUE**
- God is always speaking **--TRUE**
- We grow in prayer by PRAYING –**TRUE**
- A simple but POWERFUL way to pray is with God's Word—**TRUE**

-Check-in: "Prayer is_____" (make it personal -- answers can range from one word to a short phrase) (**note 1:** answers do not have to be fully processed, make sense or even be theologically correct—the first step of prayer is coming to God AS WE ARE, not as we should be!) (**note 2:** other people are encouraged to receive your check-in statement with a hospitable but silent posture—with prayerful respect and grace. We are not correcting, fixing, or even commenting. **E.G**., Eli assuming Hannah was drunk while praying!)

-Introduce *lectio divina* briefly

- *This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls* (Jeremiah 6:16)

-Pass out & introduce weekly prayer journals

- Our Lenten theme is **Revelation: God** –we are focusing our hearts on GOD.
- Each week (Thursday-Wednesday) will focus on one aspect of God. Week one is God's **identity**.
- Four simple steps (more teaching coming at the Saturday prayer retreat!)
    - Find a quiet, non-distracting "prayer closet" to spend time with the Lord each morning (reserve at least 20 minutes)
    - Begin with a short time of silence asking God to meet you
    - *Optional*: Read the "background" Scripture (helpful to understand the focus verse)
    - Slowly read the focus verse once. Re-read it, focusing on any words, phrases, images that capture your attention—pause on those
    - Pray (including journaling, drawing, or anything else in the blank provided), particularly based on the words & phrases that stood out to you

    - Optional: Hide God's Word in your heart (memorize it!)—it will be working in you and ON you all day and night ☺

-Practice praying the Scripture—use cover sheet verse (Psalm 89:8)

-Close & dismissal

- Reminder: see you all Saturday at 9:30 am in Celebration Chapel (please be a few minutes early to get settled in)

Praying the Scriptures Week #2
February 28, 2018

-**Welcome & Scripture** (Psalm 121)

-**Opening silence** (& *listening)* - 2 minutes

-**Check-in: "I am_____"**

-**Reminder of *lectio divina***

- The five steps
- Review of retreat
    - Prayer is a two-way conversation (God is always speaking! Are we listening?)
    - How do we best listen? We need the right ***place*** and the right ***posture*** to listen (what do I mean by that?)
        - "place"—quiet, few distractions, peaceful, BEAUTIFUL? **(anyone share places they love to pray?)**
        - "posture"—physical (comfortable, but alert, straight back), emotional, mental, spiritual, ***expectant*—"**I expect to hear from God when I come to Him in prayer—He gets to choose HOW –it may not always be some dramatic flash of lightning—"**what are some more subtle ways God may communicate** with us?"
        - As you settle in, ASK God to meet you, to speak to you.
- Review: **Reading** using Psalm 121
- Focus: **Meditation** (unpack – see attached sheet)
- Practice meditation with Psalm 121

-**Pass out & introduce weekly prayer journals**

- Our Lenten theme is **Revelation: God** –we are focusing our hearts on GOD for the whole 40 days.
- Each week (Thursday-Wednesday) will focus on one aspect of God. Week one was God's **identity**. Week #2 is **God's Creation**

-**Final dates**

- **Our final Wednesday gathering on March 28, 5:00 – 5:40 pm**
- **Final retreat & gathering – Easter Saturday, March 28, 9:30 – 11:00 am**

-**Closing blessing:** Psalm 121 and dismissal

Primer on "Meditation"

We all meditate on *something* --it's where our thoughts gravitate and focus on. Do we meditate on money? Do we meditate on food? Do we meditate on the argument I had with my spouse or co-worker? It's where we camp out in our heads and hearts.

So, with that in mind, can we be **intentional** about what we meditate upon? Don't we want to focus on our thoughts and hearts on God's truth?

In Joshua 1:8 God says this, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it." So you steep in God's Word and it begins to spread over your whole life. **Any of you ever have worries or anxieties in the middle of the night?** Instead, we fill our minds and hearts with God's Word.

Psalm 145:5: On the glorious splendor of Your majesty And on Your wonderful works, I will meditate (Psalm 145:5)

Is meditation Scriptural?

Very, very important that when we pray and listen for God's voice, we stick to what is Scriptural.

Some of the concern has been what eastern religions teach about meditation—that it's emptying our minds completely, or using a mantra that you repeat over and over again—it's shutting down our minds. That's NOT Scriptural.

But meditating on God's Word (see Isaiah 31:4)—a lion purring or growling over its prey. **Who has a dog?** Giving a dog a succulent beef bone and seeing them gnaw on it—that bone becomes EVERYTHING.

So in meditation, we're taking in God's Word and letting it master us—we chew on it, we wrestle with it, we take it in.

Closing prayer, announcements, and dismissal

Praying the Scriptures Week #3
March 7, 2018

Check-in as people filter in: What has been a blessing, what has been a challenge in this prayer journey two weeks in?

Welcome & opening Scripture: Isaiah 55

A quick recap

Praying the Scriptures begins with

- **Reading God's Word** -- what is God saying? We slow down, we let His Word speak with authority in our lives. Think of the difference between browsing the internet and reading the Bible. One is kind of like fast food or cotton candy—you just wolf it down even if it's not very nutritious; God's Word is the finest cuisine in the world. You want to savor every bite. You might find yourself curious about the ingredients and how they mix together; you might want to meet the chef and hear about his passions. Reading God's Word reveals God's very own heart and passion.
- **Meditating on God's Word**. This has to do with "what is God saying to ME?" It's a living Word—it's personal; it speaks directly to us. Today's passage: God sends forth his word and it accomplishes what He desires—His Word changes us; it transforms us. But God is a gentleman; He won't force Himself on us. Our part is to put ourselves in a position to hear God, to allow Him to speak to us at the deepest level.
- Last week in Psalm 121, the Psalmist spoke of the delight in hearing God's Word. I've been there where it just speaks to the deepest part of my soul.
- But we're honest here—sometimes it doesn't feel like a delight. What are some things that keep God's Word from being a delight?
    - Hard to understand
    - Distractions/busyness
    - Other things on our "to do" list
    - Disbelief
    - Sin blocking us from desiring God's Word
- Let me ask: Did the psalmists ever struggle with these things? Yes they did. We all do at certain times.
- A few suggestions:
    - Make sure you have a good translation, especially if this type of reading and praying are new to you. Our church's translation is the New Living Translation. New International Version is also good.
    - A Bible with study notes or a little commentary can be very helpful—they help us make sure of weird names or concepts. It'll shed light on seeming contradictions or hard to understand passages.

- A favorite practice of mine when praying the Scriptures is highlighting passages that are confusing or difficult to understand. Sometimes there's easy answers; other times the answers come over time because the Bible interprets itself. So there might be a difficult to understand or even believe statement—but then later, when we're in a different passage of Scripture, the Holy Spirit sheds light on the meaning.

So today we move to prayer which involves our response, our words, our reaction.

Reading & Meditation are the tools to help us hear what God is saying to us. We come into the conversation wanting to hear from Him first.

I need that discipline—I need to hear from God first--because otherwise I come into prayer talking, "hey Lord, this is what I need!" We're missing out on all prayer can be; we talk and then expect results, but we haven't taken time really to listen, to be in conversation with God, to simply be WITH God.

So part of praying the Scriptures is aligning ourselves with the Holy Spirit. **All you car mechanics out there—what's it like driving a car that's way out of alignment? …** When our spirits are attuned to God's Spirit, then the journey is so much smoother.

{**Pass out Isaiah 55}**

We've already done, in compressed form, the reading and the meditation of this passage. Now it's time for us to practice praying through this Scripture, speaking directly to God:

- You're welcome to start with the word or phrase that really stuck out to you earlier--
- Pray your thoughts, your questions, your excitement—how it intersects with your life. And you're encouraged to go as deep, honest, as personal as you'd like. This is God! He already knows and understands everything about us.
- Here's the awesome mystery of praying God's Word—it's a God appointment with you personally. God has things He wants to communicate to you. I think of the best conversations I've had with other people and it's almost as if two hearts come together—there's a CONNECTION. That's God's invitation to US through prayer! But it takes practice.
- Pray either silently or write some things down—remember this is you speaking to God.

Let me pray a blessing over you as you enter into prayer: "Holy Spirit, would you do your work in each of our hearts. Would you accomplish through your Word exactly what you have purposed in us. Guide us into deeper relationship with you and reveal your supernatural truth to us. We give you this time of prayer, in Jesus' name, amen!

-Closing prayer, announcements, and dismissal

Praying the Scriptures Week #4
March 14, 2018

Check-in as people filter in: I need prayer for_____

Welcome

What is prayer?

As we reach the halfway point of our journey, I want to step back from all the trees and appreciate the whole forest. I realize some of this has been very new territory for some of us. And the temptation can be, "oh no, am I doing this right? Am I doing this in the right order?" And prayer becomes stressful.

Jim summed it up well last week to me. He said, "I was getting worried about trying to do everything in the right order until I realized what's really going on here—this is just about helping us pray. The key to growing in prayer is to start! Just do it!

We've been CREATED to connect with our God. This world, our busy lives, our own fallenness—those things push against our desire and our ability to pray. Prayer is HARD! For ALL OF US, at times.

But does that mean we just give up? Decide, "well maybe praying just isn't for me?" No, we believe the REWARDS make the effort MORE than worth it.

So we've laid an important foundation already—prayer is relationship with God. It involves many of the same things as our human relationships—we listen, we talk, we spend time together. Looking ahead to the second half of our journey—a few things.

- Today we talk about contemplation which sounds like, "wow, are we in a monastery or something?" This means simply BEING with God, enjoying His presence. More about that in a minute!
- Starting next week, we're going to open things up a little bit. We have this prayer toolbox and we want to start using those prayer tools and apply them very personally to our own lives. So what ways is God calling YOU to grow in prayer? Maybe it's praying for other people; maybe it's to learn to be quiet before God; maybe it's learning to pray out loud; maybe it's getting out of the box of close your eyes, bow your head and experiencing more **active prayer**. Maybe it's just getting to know more of who God really IS.
- So for today, we're going to talk about what it means to BE with God and we're going to do something a little different.

What is prayer?

- It's listening, it's responding, and it's being WITH God—and when we make those things intentional, they become more and more natural—we find ourselves hearing God

and responding to Him and simply enjoying His presence throughout the DAY! And that's awesome.

- **So what does it mean to BE with God? Any thoughts?**
- Being with someone is the best way to grow that relationship.

So a story: I was going through a difficult season of life in my 20's. I was living in Seattle at the time, but flew up to see my parents and we traveled down to the southern coast of Alaska and traveled by boat to a very secluded area—very green, very "back to nature." It was one of the richest times of simply BEING with God that I can remember. See, I think He does some special work in us when we simply enter into his presence. Words come and go, but they're not required—we don't have to fill the silence with God. I think there's a big difference between silence and emptiness. Emptiness is like a void and it's not fun. Silence allows the words and the chatter to fall away and we just enjoy one another.

Break off into three small groups (about 8-10 each group)…

-Check-in: how is your prayer journey going? What are some joys or frustrations? What would you most like to gain in our final three weeks?

Read Mark 10:46-52 twice

- **First time—imagine the scene as you hear it being read**
- **Second time—imagine YOURSELF in this scene—and Jesus is looking at YOU and asking, "what do you want me to do for you?" Spend some time there…**

{Debrief and pray together}

--

Challenge: the final part of the verse: what did the man do after receiving his heart's request? He FOLLOWED AFTER Jesus… He wanted to BE with Jesus. What would it mean to spend your days WITH Jesus?

Closing prayer, announcements, and dismissal

Praying the Scriptures Week #5
March 21, 2018

Welcome – we'll do our check-in in just a moment.

Welcome to week #5 -- I want to thank you for your commitment to this prayer journey.

- For some of you, this is just hitting you exactly where you live; it's meaningful; it's a blessing, even though there are challenges along the way
- For others, it's a little different, but it's giving you a reason to pray and try things out and you're hoping God will meet you in that
- Still for others, "**what am I doing here**? This isn't my thing at all, but it's only 40 days, and I'll stick it out to the end."

For those of you in that last group, thank you for your steadfastness. Prayer is not easy and it's good to own our struggles and ask God to help us. When we can be completely honest, I believe that's where God begins to work in us.

There are different ways to pray… **for those of you who went to Sunday School as children, how did they teach you to pray?** {Fold your hands, close your eyes, and bow your head}—**for some of us, that's recipe for falling asleep.**

God created each of us uniquely and there will be some ways of praying that just connect with you better—I've put a little addition in to our weekly Scripture reading. Next week, we'll talk about prayer for those of us who have trouble sitting still.

Sometimes you just need to mix it up—maybe a style of prayer that you've been doing for a while is getting stale.

- Scripture was originally written in order to be read aloud—they didn't have a lot of books back then. So try reading your passage aloud; sometimes I listen to a Scripture on CD.
- Sometimes the Bible gets stale because I'm just taking it in as information rather than as God's living word to me. So I might read about forgiveness—it might even stir my heart—but if I don't let God's Word change me; if I never do anything about it, Scripture will start losing its power—it's just words on a page **(the difference between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee)**

Is anyone thirsty?
Come and drink—
even if you have no money!
2 **Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength?**
Why pay for food that does you no good?
Listen to me, and you will eat what is good.
You will enjoy the finest food.

3 "Come to me with your ears wide open.
Listen, and you will find life.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you.
I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David.
6 Seek the LORD **while you can find him.**
Call on him now while he is near.
7 Let the wicked change their ways
and banish the very thought of doing wrong.
Let them turn to the LORD **that he may have mercy on them.**
Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously.

Check-in as people filter in: This week, I experienced God_____

Praying the Scriptures **(w/ PP)**

Announcements:

- Next Wednesday meet from 5:00 – 5:40 pm (NO soup & sandwich, no service)
- Saturday, March 31—final prayer retreat
- I believe in God appointments—start thinking, "**what's next for ME**?" An "**what's next for our church**?" God moves in community!

Praying the Scriptures Week #6
March 28, 2018

-Gathering

-Scripture from Psalm 31 (**the Psalms are the Bible's prayer book and speak to every situation in life, even our struggles and doubts).**

- Where do you need God's protection and salvation?
    - Health concerns?
    - Marriage?
    - A family member?
    - Finances?
    - At work?
    - Maybe just in your very own soul

{Read again}

{Silence & prayer}

-

Small group time (details below)

-

Large group time

- Look ahead to the Saturday retreat—9:00 – 110:00 am

Return to small group time for prayer

-Take some time to pray for one another (a few seconds of sharing; prayer silently as a group)

-Numbers 6 blessing:

{Gather in three circles}

<u>Discussion in small groups</u>

-what is one thing you have learned or experienced about prayer during this prayer journey?

-what is one question you still have about prayer? (*we'll just let the questions stand--no need to answer the question during this time*)

<u>Lectio</u>

{Read Matthew 4:1-11 two times aloud}

The first time, enter into the scene with your five senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, touch… imagine yourself IN the story.

{read 1st time}

Now, as I read it a second time—this time, listen for a word or phrase that stands out to you…
{read 2nd time}

{*after second reading}:*

Spend a little time bringing that word or phrase that stuck out to you to God in prayer—what would He like to communicate to you?

Discussion:

Would anyone like to share about their word or phrase?

What did you notice…

- About Jesus?
- about the story?
- About yourself?

Appendix C

Spiritual Life Inventory Questionnaires

Introductory Spiritual Life Inventory Questionaire

Name_____ Date_____

1) **How long have you had a personal relationship with Jesus? _____**

2) **How many years have you been attending Olivet? _____**

For the next set of questions, circle the number that **best** describes your experiences and feelings over the last 7 days using the 1-5 scale below:

1-Does not describe me ever

2-Does not describe me much of the time

3-Neutral

4-Describes me much of the time

5-Describes me all the time

3) I want to grow in my prayer life

1 2 3 4 5

4) My prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now

1 2 3 4 5

5) God feels distant to me

1 2 3 4 5

6) Prayer seems more frustrating than satisfying

1 2 3 4 5

7) When I pray, I get distracted easily

1 2 3 4 5

8) Waiting for God to answer my prayers is difficult

1 2 3 4 5

9) I feel unconditionally loved by God

1 2 3 4 5

10) It's difficult for me to ask God for anything
1 2 3 4 5

11) God feels close to me during this season of my life
1 2 3 4 5

12) I sometimes feel "stuck" in my spiritual life
1 2 3 4 5

13) I feel like a beginner at prayer
1 2 3 4 5

14) I am experiencing a dark night of the soul right now
1 2 3 4 5

15) I trust God completely
1 2 3 4 5

16) My highest desire is intimacy with God
1 2 3 4 5

17) I am fearful of God
1 2 3 4 5

18) I desire to follow God no matter where He leads
1 2 3 4 5

Comments or life events that may have impacted your answers above (*confidential*):

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Closing Spiritual Life Inventory Questionnaire

Name_____ Date_____

Please circle the number that **best** describes your experiences and feelings over the last 7 days using the 1-5 scale below:

1-Does not describe me ever

2-Does not describe me much of the time

3-Neutral

4-Describes me much of the time

5-Describes me all the time

1) I want to grow in my prayer life

1 2 3 4 5

2) My prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now

1 2 3 4 5

3) God feels distant to me

1 2 3 4 5

4) Prayer seems more frustrating than satisfying

1 2 3 4 5

5) When I pray, I get distracted easily

1 2 3 4 5

6) Waiting for God to answer my prayers is difficult

1 2 3 4 5

7) I feel unconditionally loved by God

1 2 3 4 5

8) It's difficult for me to ask God for anything

1 2 3 4 5

9) God feels close to me during this season of my life

1 2 3 4 5

10) I sometimes feel “stuck” in my spiritual life

1 2 3 4 5

11) I feel like a beginner at prayer

1 2 3 4 5

12) I am experiencing a dark night of the soul right now

1 2 3 4 5

13) I trust God completely

1 2 3 4 5

14) My highest desire is intimacy with God

1 2 3 4 5

15) I am fearful of God

1 2 3 4 5

16) I desire to follow God no matter where He leads

1 2 3 4 5

Comments or life events/changes that may have impacted your answers above (*confidential*):

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

[ ] I would be interested in being part of a continuing prayer journey group

Appendix D

Praying the Scriptures Prayer Journals

Praying the Scriptures

Week #1

"God's Identity"

Who is like you, LORD God Almighty?
You, LORD, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you (Psalm 89:8).

Questions to ponder this week

What does this Scripture reveal about God?

What does this Scripture reveal about me?

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).

Day #1—*God's Identity*

Background: **Psalm 23**

Focus verse: "**The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need"** (Psalm 23:1).

Day #2—*God's Identity*

Background: **Isaiah 6:1-8**

Focus verse: "**And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory'"** (Isaiah 6:3).

Day #3—*God's Identity*

Background: **Psalm 90:1-12**

Focus verse: "**Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God"** (Psalm 90:2).

Day #4—*God's Identity*

Background: **I John 1:1-5**

Focus verse: "**God is light; in him there is no darkness at all"** (I John 1:5).

Day #5—*God's Identity*

Background: **Psalm 139:1-18**

Focus verses: "**Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast"** (Psalm 139:7-10).

Day #6—*God's Identity*

Background: **Deuteronomy 32:1-4**

Focus verse: "**He is the Rock; his deeds are perfect. Everything He does is just and fair. He is a faithful God who does no wrong; how just and upright He is!"** (Deuteronomy 32:4).

Day #7—*God's Identity*

Background: **Isaiah 30:15-18**

Focus verse: "**Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!"** (Isaiah 30:18).

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.

-Psalm 27:8

Praying the Scriptures

Week #2

"God's Creation"

The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship (Psalm 19:1).

Questions to ponder

What does this Scripture reveal about God?

What does this Scripture reveal about me?

How does this Scripture speak to my life?

I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1)

Day #1—*God's Creation*

Background: **Genesis 1:1-5**

Focus verse: "**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth"** (Genesis 1:1).

Day #2—*God's Creation*

Background: **Genesis 1:26 - Genesis 2:4**

Focus verse: **"So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"** (Genesis 1:27).

Day #3—*God's Creation*

Background: **Jeremiah 32:16-23**

Focus verse: **"O Sovereign LORD! You made the heavens and earth by your strong hand and powerful arm. Nothing is too hard for you!"** (Jeremiah 32:17)

Day #4—*God's Creation*

Background: **Isaiah 40:25-31**

Focus verse: **"Have you never heard? Have you never understood? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary. No one can measure the depths of his understanding"** (Isaiah 40:28).

Day #5—*God's Creation*

Background: **Psalm 139:13-18**

Focus verses: "**For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well"** (Psalm 139:13-14).

Day #6—*God's Creation*

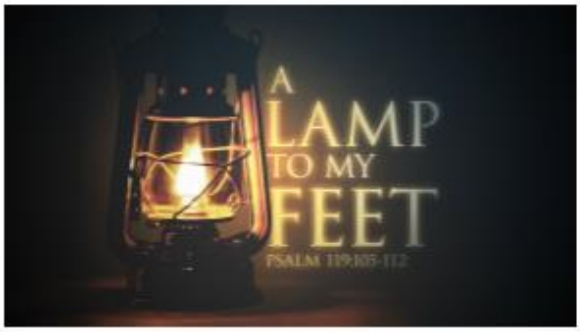
Background: **Revelation 4**

Focus verse: **"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."** (Revelation 4:11)

Day #7—*God's Creation*

Background: **2 Corinthians 5**

Focus verse: "**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"** (2 Corinthians 5:17).



Praying the Scriptures

Week #3

"God's Promises"

"Deep in your hearts you know that every promise of the LORD your God has come true. Not a single one has failed!" (Joshua 23:14)

Questions to ponder

What does this Scripture reveal about God?

What does this Scripture reveal about me?

How does this Scripture speak to my life?

Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise (Hebrews 10:23)

Day #1—*God's Promises*

Background: **Jeremiah 29:1-14**

Focus verse: **"For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope"** (Jeremiah 29:11).

Day #2—*God's Promises*

Background: **Exodus 14:1-14**

Focus verse: **"The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still"** (Exodus 14:14).

Day #3—*God's Promises*

Background: **Matthew 11:25-30**

Focus verse: **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"** (Matthew 11:28).

Day #4—*God's Promises*

Background: **I Corinthians 10:1-15**

Focus verse: **"The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure"** (I Corinthians 10:13).

Day #5—*God's Promises*

Background: **Isaiah 41:8-14**

Focus verses: **"Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand"** (Isaiah 41:10).

Day #6—*God's Promises*

Background: **I John 1:1-10**

Focus verse: **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"** (I John 1:9).

Day #7—*God's Promises*

Background: **Romans 8:18-30**

Focus verse: **"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them"** (Romans 8:28).

Praying the Scriptures

Week #4

"God's Love"

"Give thanks to the God of heaven. His faithful love endures forever" (Psalm 136:26).

Questions to ponder

What does this Scripture reveal about God?

What does this Scripture reveal about me?

How does this Scripture speak to my life?

Day #1—*God's Love*

Background: **Psalm 86:1-17**

Focus verse: "**But you, O Lord, are a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness** (Psalm 86:15).

Day #2—*God's Love*

Background: **I Corinthians 13:1-13**

Focus verse: **"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance** (I Corinthians 13:4-7).

Day #3—*God's Love*

Background: **Romans 8:31-39**

Focus verse: **"No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8:39).

Day #4—*God's Love*

Background: **Ephesians 2:1-10**

Focus verse: **"But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead -- it is only by God's grace that you have been saved!"** (Ephesians 2:4)

Day #5—*God's Love*

Background: **Zephaniah 3:8-20**

Focus verses: **"For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs"** (Zephaniah 3:17).

Day #6—*God's Love*

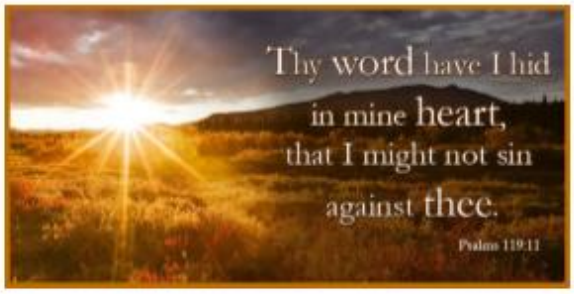
Background: **I John 3:1-11**

Focus verse: **See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!** (I John 3:1)

Day #7—*God's Love*

Background: **John 3:1-17**

Focus verse: **"For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:16).



Praying the Scriptures

Week #5

"God: JESUS"

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).

Questions to ponder this week

What does this Scripture reveal about God?

What does this Scripture reveal about me?

How does this Scripture speak to my life?

"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love" (John 15:9).

Day #1—*God: JESUS*

Background: **Isaiah 9:1-7**

Focus verse: **"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"** (Isaiah 9:6).

Day #2—*God: JESUS*

Background: **John 14:1-29**

Focus verse: **"Jesus told him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me'"** (John 14:6).

Day #3—*God: JESUS*

Background: **John 13:1-17**

Focus verse: **"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him"** (John 13:3-5).

Day #4—*God: JESUS*

Background: **Isaiah 53**

Focus verse: **"He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care"** (Isaiah 53:3).

Day #5—*God: JESUS*

Background: **John 19:16-37**

Focus verses: **"When Jesus had tasted it, he said, 'It is finished!' Then he bowed his head and released his spirit"** (John 19:30).

Day #6—*God: JESUS*

Background: **Ephesians 3:1-13**

Focus verse: **"Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence"** (Ephesians 3:12).

Day #7—*God: JESUS*

Background: **Ephesians 3:14-21**

Focus verse: **"May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God"** (Ephesians 3:19).

Praying the Scriptures

Week #6

"God: HOLY SPIRIT"

He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace, he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life (Titus 3:6-7)

Questions to ponder this week

What does this Scripture reveal about God?

What does this Scripture reveal about me?

How does this Scripture speak to my life?

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth" (John 14:16-17).

Day #1—*God: HOLY SPIRIT*

Background: **Ephesians 1:3-14**

Focus verse: **"When you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him"** (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Day #2—*God: HOLY SPIRIT*

Background: **John 3:1-21**

Focus verse: **"Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit"** (John 3:6-8).

Day #3—*God: HOLY SPIRIT*

Background: **Romans 8:18-30**

Focus verse: **"And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words"** (Romans 8:26)

Day #4—*God: HOLY SPIRIT*

Background: **I Corinthians 3:1-17**

Focus verse: **"Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?"** (I Corinthians 3:16)

Day #5—*God: HOLY SPIRIT*

Background: **Ephesians 4:17-32**

Focus verses: **"And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption"** (Ephesians 4:30)

Day #6—*God: HOLY SPIRIT*

Background: **2 Corinthians 3**

Focus verse: **"For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom"** (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Day #7—*God: HOLY SPIRIT*

Background: **Jude**

Focus verse: **"But you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit"** (Jude 1:20)

gives us assurance we are God's children
inspired Scripture
dwells in us as God's temple
opens our minds to know
brings to life fruit that displays
fills us
the things of God
the character of God
cleanses, washes, & makes right with God
our guarantee of salvation
inspires joy
another helper to be with us & in us
Holy Spirit
gives us strength in our inner being
pours God's love into our hearts
blows where it wills
gives life to our mortal bodies
gives us spiritual gifts to use for the Body & to honor God
leads us & guides us
intercededes with signs
poured into
fills & empowers
too deep for words
our hearts
helps us remember the words of Jesus
teaches us the truth about Jesus
helps us confess Jesus as Lord

Appendix E

Praying the Scriptures Lenten Retreat Lesson Plan

February 24, 2018

-{Music playing softly & candle lit}

-{PowerPoint screen—"Be still and know that I am God" as people enter}

-Welcome & opening Scripture:

"I wait quietly before God, for my victory comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will never be shaken. ... Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will not be shaken. ... God has spoken plainly, and I have heard it many times: Power, O God, belongs to you; unfailing love, O Lord, is yours" (Psalm 62).

Discussion—we're going to talk about two things today—praying and God's Word and how we bring those two things together.

Let's start with **prayer**—a few more true/false questions:

- Prayer is a gift from God--TRUE
- Prayer always feels like a gift
    - Why not? What makes prayer so challenging?
- I googled, "how many books on prayer have been written?" I couldn't get an exact answer, but it's a LOT. And there's a lot of formulas and strategies for prayer. I've read a lot of those books, some better than others, but I'm still left with my own weaknesses, my own distractions, my own busy schedule. I don't think God wants prayer to be complicated and frustrating—**thoughts?**

What challenges do we encounter with prayer?

Discussion—reading Scripture

True/false:

The Bible is God's inspired Word

It helps us grow, be encouraged, and be challenged

Christians should read the Word of God

Discuss: Why don't people read the Word? Why does it usually sit on the shelf? What are some of the challenges people face?

Praying the Scriptures brings prayer and God's Word TOGETHER. For this Lenten prayer journey, we're basing it on the ancient prayer practice of "lectio divina" which simply Latin for "holy reading"—it's NOT

- Read through the Bible in a year (huge quantities)
- A passage followed by a predigested devotional (it's someone else's thoughts on Scripture)
- Bible study (studying the background, word meanings—more intellectual and head knowledge)

It IS:

- It's quieting ourselves enough to really hear from God
- Slowly allowing God's Word to absorb deeply into us
- It's opening up our hearts and lives to the Holy Spirit's searching and transformation (**scary—"we're as COMFORTABLE as we dare to be"**)
- It's allowing God's Word to go from our head down into our heart where it begins changing us deeply
- God's Word and presence become constant companions ("I meditate on your word day and night")
- God's word and Spirit begin influencing our thoughts, our words, and our actions.
- There is NO RUSH—we can read and absorb as slowly as we need. **That's different** from our usual "efficiency-based" models of getting it done. We don't read Scripture; Scripture starts reading US; We don't master Scripture; Scripture masters US.

A quick over-view of *lectio divina* –praying the Scriptures

Focus on READING today (I don't want to overwhelm us with information, so we're only going in-depth on "reading" today)

So our prayer time actually begins with reading God's Word—His Word primes the pump of our Spirit… but let's back up a little bit.

Are you ready to try an experiment?

I need someone willing to read our Scripture passage but is also a good sport—you'll see why.

Read Psalm 1—but with noises, coughing, maybe others conversations… just allow distractions in your head (DON'T follow along on the paper—just have the words be background) **READ**

Scenario: We begin in a posture of prayer and listening—prayer really is a two-way conversation. You're going to have a wonderful conversation with a dear friend. You know your friend has a lot they want to share with you. What do you need to do as you prepare to meet with your friend and listen deeply?

- Turn off your cell phone
- Find a comfortable, quiet place to talk
- Don't allow distractions to rule
- Discover a time of day that is good for you (are you a morning person?)
- (Maybe it's really hard to sit still for long—we learn in Sunday School that prayer is hands folded, eyes closed, sitting still. My Father in Law is here—he's got peaceful hunting treehouses all over his property—what a peaceful place to pray. I've done prayer walks, I've had worship music in the background. We just want to caution—don't overwhelm the voice of God. We need to be in a posture of hearing and receiving, because it takes time to begin hearing his voice over all the din of this world)

Reading Scripture—this is God speaking to us. It's His Word to us. It's His end of the conversation.

Part of the reading is that we want to understand what God is saying to us. So, for our devotionals, we have a focus verse, but we also have the background passage. That helps us understand what the focus verse means (**joining a conversation halfway in can lead to misunderstandings**--).

So in this reading time you can do a lot of things:

- Read the passage slowly and carefully
- I sometimes underline words that stand out to me, that I see repeated—in Scripture, usually repeated words are there for some kind of emphasis.
- Sometimes, if it's a difficult passage, I might consult a commentary. Some of your Bibles have study notes—those can be helpful. Just a caution—it's very easy to get carried away studying the background of a Scripture and lose track of time completely. That's Bible study –it's a different kind of Bible reading and it's valuable, but we're praying the Scriptures which is more devotional.

So let's try it out with Psalm 1

Read slowly but not too slowly—we want to get through the whole passage in one try….

Closing prayer, announcements, and dismissal

Appendix F

Praying the Scriptures Closing Retreat Lesson Plan
March 31, 2018

Welcome

Devotional: *A visit from Jesus* (take time with HIM – "Behold I stand at the door and knock")

Check-in question: what was that experience like for you?
One of the biggest blessings for me in my prayer life is knowing that Jesus is right here with me when I pray… that I don't need to launch my prayers a million miles up into heaven and hope they make it; he is with us, he is among us; he is IN us.
There's times our faith will be tested in that—I've experienced it where it *feels* like my prayers just fall back down to earth; or what I'm experiencing is so overwhelming, so fearful, that it overwhelms my sense of God's presence. But over and over again, God tells us to TRUST, to KNOW, and to BELIEVE that He is with us. It's faith over feelings.

{foggy day—obscuring the son—but we know it's still THERE! – God is still there no matter what… }

And so that starts to inform our prayer life. Yes, we meet with Him through time in the Word and intentional times of prayer. We meet with God through worship and through being together… but we also relate to Him throughout the day as our God and our life companion. He's always with us.

…I tend to fixate on things—I worry about something; I process it; I can almost get stuck in a groove of always working through issues… but I'm learning to invite God into those things—and I find He gets me unstuck… He changes my heart; he gives me wisdom and grace; he helps me to see the situation with HIS eyes… THAT's the gift of prayer.

{testimonies—"have any of you in these past 40 days experienced God in the midst of your day like this – whether through the focus verse or in some other way?"

(I find that meeting with God and praying into our Scripture passage is like planting the seed—and it's amazing how it sprouts up and brings LIFE!}

Lectio—Matthew 13:1-9

#1 -imagine being in this agricultural scene—and observing all of this happening

#2 --how do you FEEL about these seeds and different kinds of soil? Does the story make you happy? Sad? Something else?

#3—what is God saying to ME through this passage?

{Break}

Silent Saturday
Silence—the hard and the good kinds

Hard
The waiting room while your family member is having surgery
The homebound elderly person who has no one that visits them
After a devastating storm hits and the eerie quiet aftermath
The silence when our prayers don't seem to be answered much less even HEARD by God
-our anxieties and worries seem to GROW in the silence (3:00 am)..

"I'm not anxious. I'm just extremely well educated about all the things that can go catastrophically wrong." - Anonymous

{**some of us have experienced these things; some of us are experiencing how hard that kind of silence is RIGHT now**}

-**consider the disciples** on this silent Saturday—after the horrific events of Good Friday—they probably hadn't slept; they were exhausted, terrified; their dreams were DEAD

--Is God in the midst of that kind of hard, deadening silence?

Blessed
-Psalm 23: Sitting beside still waters
-After a chaotic, noisy day, just sitting down in a quiet room
-Experiencing the presence of God with us—speaking into our hearts

Lectio – Mark 6

I want us to spend a little time in Mark chapter 6 (please turn there)… Mark is the "action" Gospel. You see the words, "suddenly," and "immediately," and "then they went…" And several big things happen in Mark 6:

- It begins with Jesus returning to his hometown, Nazareth. He goes to the synagogue, he's teaching, he's sharing the love of God. And how does the crowd respond?

- What next?

Then, Mark 6 describes Jesus sending the twelve out "two by two," to preach, teach, cast out evil spirits, and heal.

Their ministry succeeds, the Bible tells us. They accomplish what Jesus has empowered them to do—they've just served the LORD! But when they return to him, notice what Jesus DOESN'T say. He doesn't say "Great! Don't stop now, build on your momentum, keep working!" Rather, look at what happens:

"The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'" (Mark 6:30-31) There's a rhythm to the Christian walk… We serve, we work, we live it out, but we will quickly become weak and tired and burned out unless we stay connected to the vine, stay connected to Jesus…

We can also be guilty of running ahead of God or wandering off into what "SEEMS" right to us. Coming away with Jesus not only recharges our batteries; we experience his grace and life and WISDOM for direction. Sometimes we don't realize how much we need it until we actually DO it!

Let's read the verse this way: So many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance *to be fed*. What are you doing to nourish your soul? Are you letting Jesus feed you with his presence? Have you feasted on his love by spending time in solitude?

Silent Saturday -- empty silence ("where are you God?") -- blessed silence, "God is in this place"--let all the earth keep silent before Him... seeds burrowing into the earth, taking root... so much happens in silence

{Spend time alone with God—pass out letter}

{return and debrief}

Time in groups of 3-5 praying for one another
-Closing thoughts and prayer

- What's next?
- Please fill out survey and return to you

-Closing prayer, announcements, and dismissal

Appendix G

Overview of Participants

01 – male, mid-60's, believer for 60+ years, member of church for 7 years, retired but active in lay ministry, married to participant 02

02 – female, late-50's, believer for 20+ years (but experienced a new spiritual awakening 8 years ago), member of church for 7 years, full-time medical professional, married to participant 01

03 – male, mid-50's, believer for …, member of church for …., unemployed, struggles with depression, active in other prayer groups, married

04 – female, early-70's, believer for most of life, member of church for 5 years, full-time business professional, church officer, married

05 – female, early 70's, believer for most of life, member of church for 7 years, retired, married, sister to participant 06

06 – female, early 70's, believer for most of life, member of church for 7 years, retired, married, sister to participant 05

07 – female, late 20's, believer for most of life, but made deeper commitment 5 years ago, full-time homemaker, married – husband participated in journey, but did not complete project forms

08 – female, mid-70's, believer for all of life, active in church care ministries and prayer groups, retired, married to participant 09

09 – male, mid-70's, believer for all of life, active in church care ministries, retired, married to participant 08

10 – female, mid-50's, long-time believer, active in church care ministries, retired, married

11 – female, late-50's, long-time believer, church member for 8 years, , full-time professional, single

12 – female, late 50's, believer for 5 years, active in church care ministries, church member for 5 years, full-time office worker, married to participant 13

13 – male, early 60's, believer for 5 years, active in church care ministries, church member for 5 years, retired, married to participant 12

14 – female, early 30's, believer for 20+ years, attending Olivet for 2 years, full-time telecommunications professional, single, daughter of participants 18 & 19

15 – female, mid-60's, believer for most of life, attending Olivet for 4 years, part-time medical professional, married – husband also attended prayer journey, but did not complete project forms

16 – female, mid-70's, believer for 2 years, attending Olivet for 2 years, retired, wife of participant 17

17 – male, late 60's, believer for 2 years, attending Olivet for 2 years, retired, husband of participant 16

18 – female, mid-60's, believer for whole life, attending Olivet for 2 years, retired, wife of participant 19

19 – male, mid-60's, believer for whole life, attending Olivet for 2 years, retired, husband of participant 18

Appendix H

Data and Results

PRE DATA

Participant ID	I want to grow in my prayer life	(REVERSE) My prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now	(REVERSE) God feels distant to me	(REVERSE) Prayer seems more frustrating than satisfying	(REVERSE) When I pray, I get distracted easily	(REVERSE) Waiting for God to answer my prayers is difficult	I feel unconditionally loved by God	(REVERSE) It's difficult for me to ask God for anything	God feels close to me during this season of my life	(REVERSE) I sometimes feel "stuck" in my spiritual life	(REVERSE) I feel like a beginner at prayer	(REVERSE) I am experiencing a dark night of the soul right now	I trust God completely	My highest desire is intimacy with God	(REVERSE) I am fearful of God	I desire to follow God no matter where He leads
1	4	2	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	2	2	2	4	5	1	5
2	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
3	2	2	4	4	1	4	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	4	3	2
4	5	3	4	3	2	2	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	5	2	4
5	4	2	4	3	4	3	5	4	4	4	3	3	4	5	5	4
6	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	5	5
7	5	4	5	4	3	3	5	5	4	5	3	5	5	5	1	5
8	5	3	2	2	2	3	5	4	5	2	4	5	5	5	2	5
9	5	3	3	4	3	3	4	3	4	2	2	4	5	5	3	5
10	4	4	5	4	2	2	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	4
11	5	2	4	3	1	2	5	4	4	2	4	4	4	5	4	3
12	4	3	4	5	2	3	4	4	5	3	4	5	3	5	3	3
13	4	3	3	3	2	4	2	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	3
14	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	5
15	4	2	3	3	2	2	5	4	3	2	2	4	5	3	3	4
16	5	2	2	2	3	3	5	2	4	2	4	4	5	3	3	5
17	5	4	3	3	3	2	3	2	3	2	2	3	3	3	3	3
18	4	2	4	5	2	2	2	4	3	2	3	2	2	5	4	5
19	5	2	4	3	2	2	4	5	2	3	3	3	3	5	4	4

POST DATA

Participant ID	I want to grow in my prayer life	(REVERSE) My prayer life feels like it's in a rut right now	(REVERSE) God feels distant to me	(REVERSE) Prayer seems more frustrating than satisfying	(REVERSE) When I pray, I get distracted easily	(REVERSE) Waiting for God to answer my prayers is difficult	I feel unconditionally loved by God	(REVERSE) It's difficult for me to ask God for anything	God feels close to me during this season of my life	(REVERSE) I sometimes feel "stuck" in my spiritual life	(REVERSE) I feel like a beginner at prayer	(REVERSE) I am experiencing a dark night of the soul right now	I trust God completely	My highest desire is intimacy with God	(REVERSE) I am fearful of God	I desire to follow God no matter where He leads
1	5	2	5	5	4	5	5	2	5	2	5	5	5	5	5	5
2	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
3	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	4
4	5	4	4	4	3	3	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	5	1	5
5	5	4	4	4	4	4	5	1	5	5	4	4	5	5	4	5
6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
7	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	2	4
8	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	5	4	5
9	4	3	4	4	4	3	4	2	3	3	2	4	2	2	3	4
10	5	4	5	4	3	3	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	5	4
11	4	2	4	4	2	2	5	4	4	2	4	4	4	5	4	4
12	5	4	4	5	3	4	5	5	4	2	4	5	4	4	3	4
13	5	3	3	4	2	3	5	1	4	2	2	5	5	4	2	4
14	4	4	4	4	4	4	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4
15	5	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	5	5	2	5
16	5	3	5	4	3	2	5	3	5	3	2	5	5	5	4	5
17	5	3	4	3	3	4	4	2	4	3	2	4	5	4	4	4
18	5	4	4	4	3	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	4	4
19	5	3	4	5	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	4	4

Results																
P VALUE	0.10996	0.00386	0.02862	0.00748	0.00079	0.00292	0.14315	0.28516	0.03488	0.05617	0.10747	0.01493	0.16283	0.83398	0.16283	0.20482
Standard Deviation S PRE:	1.11801		Standard Deviation S POST:	0.93173												
Average Score Pre	4.42105	2.94737	3.84211	3.68421	2.68421	2.94737	4.15789	3.84211	3.89474	3.05263	3.26316	3.84211	4.05263	4.47368	3.21053	4.15789
Average Score Post	4.78947	3.57895	4.36842	4.26316	3.47368	3.68421	4.63158	3.52632	4.36842	3.57895	3.73684	4.52632	4.47368	4.52632	3.63158	4.42105
Pre/Post Difference	0.36842	0.63158	0.52632	0.57895	0.78947	0.73684	0.47368	-0.31579	0.47368	0.52632	0.47368	0.68421	0.42105	0.05263	0.42105	0.26316
Percent change	7.36842	12.6316	10.5263	11.5789	15.7895	14.7368	9.47368	-6.31579	9.47368	10.5263	9.47368	13.6842	8.42105	1.05263	8.42105	5.26316

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